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FRIENDSHIP

A STORY

BY OUIDA

AUTHOR OF 'PUCK' 'ARIADNÊ' 'SIGNA' ETC.

'Si l'emploi de la Comédie est de corriger les vices, je ne vois pas par quelle raison il y en aura de privilégiés' MOLIÈRE

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. III.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1878

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LONDON : PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

FRIENDSHIP.

CHAPTER XXX.

LENT had come, and Lady Joan had her black domino and loup hung up in a closet, and put on the meeting-house clothes very demurely, and devoted herself in this pious and dreary period of social life to those especial patron saints of hers, the 'people passing through.' The 'people passing through' were rather bored in Lent, and were glad to be taken about by her to Mimo's and Trillo's to fill up the dull mornings; and in the evening to dine with her—'just by ourselves, you know—nothing but fish'—or ask her to dinner at their various hotels. In Lent, Lady Joan was

always as hard at work as the chiming bells and the swinging censers; it was her harvest-time, when she looked forward to gathering in the fruits of all the seeds of good-nature, hospitality, attention, and love of the fine arts, which she had been sowing so broadcast ever since early winter. 'The people passing through' were always beginning by that time to think of passing out; and it was not her fault if they did not bear with them, as 'homing' birds are said to bear foreign seeds, innumerable praises of the Casa Challoner and also numerous articles out of it.

She had borne with the burden of the Lady Blanks all winter; she had endured like the staunchest of martyrs their pomposity or prolixity, their coldness or their curiosity; she had toiled early and late to smile on them and their heavy connubial moiety—magistrate, member of parliament, or peerage nonentity; their pink, long-limbed, long-lipped daughters; their straw-coloured monosyllabic sons; their general infinite ponderousness, weariness, and pre-eminent respectability. She had borne them all with patience inexhaustible, with fortitude unsurpassable.

It was in Lent that she looked for her rewards; it was in Lent that the Lady Blanks asked her to mornings of classical music and teas for colonial bishops; that the pink-cheeked daughters and the straw-coloured sons rode over and lunched at Fiordelisa; that the connubial moieties became of the sheep that the crook of Mr. Challoner guarded; or, if less obliging than that, at least bought a Parmeggianino or a Tabernacle, a fine bit of buhl, or a nice piece of old Modena tapestry.

Lent was her harvest, when the narcissi and the tulips were all out in the Campagna, and the Northerners began to feel hot and to get in a fright about fever, and the families were pleased to breathe the hill-air of Fiordelisa; and the Lady Blanks would say, 'See you in town this season?—yes?—oh!—yes? Delighted;' and resolved that, after all her civility, they must certainly know her in London.

In Lent the Lady Blanks kept her busy, and Fiordelisa was better seen without its lord, so that in Lent Ioris was freer than at any other season of the year.

In the long, still, sunny mornings, when she was escorting the Lady Blanks to Mimo's and Trillo's, or riding out with the straw-coloured sons to Fiordelisa, he found his way to the flower-filled chamber of Etoile, and passed the hours in that sweet atmosphere of sympathy, that vague ecstatic trouble which fills the daybreak of love with a light that is only the lovelier for its clouds.

He found a repose with her that was even sweeter than passion. He was true with her, and before her; here was her essential charm to him. Whoever has to wear a mask is in a sense ill at ease. In the presence of Etoile he threw his mask away. His real nature—impulsive, generous, erring, repentant, tender, contemptuous, sensitive, ironical, by turns—was laid bare to her. He did not speak all the truth to her, but he spoke nothing that was not the truth.

It was a sort of bond with him to her to feel that he did not deceive her. The perpetual strain of the comedy in which he had always to play his part in the Casa Challoner became wearisome; and as his mistress never suspected that he wore a mask he never dared to unloosen it.

With this other woman, who understood him and stripped the velvet off his mask and saw the pasteboard underneath, he could toss it aside without disguise, and laugh at the use of it or sigh at the use of it, whichever his mood might be.

It may be doubted if a man is ever really happy with a woman with whom he cannot be candid. The charm of intimacy lies in perfect ease. To need a lie is to endure a restraint.

When tired and perplexed with the chaos in which his fortunes were whirling, in the darkness of disasters that he scarcely understood and still less knew how to confront, he escaped from them as into paradise to the quiet painted chamber, with the mellow sunlight sleeping on the whiteness of the Lenten lilies.

Now and then he asked himself, 'Where am I drifting?' but he waited for no answer, and drifted on with closed eyes.

With his mistress he had never been happy. His heart for a while had been 'burned in the poisonous solvent' which tens of thousands take for love, knowing no better or loftier thing all

their lives long; but the poison had burned itself away and left as its dregs disquietude and satiety. With Etoile he was happy as a man can only be when the better nature in him is satisfied and not ashamed.

Yet, partly because it was a natural instinct with him to conceal what most he felt, partly from the same sense that makes a man shy of his religion being touched or his emotions laughed at, chiefly because he was always afraid of the ruthless vengeance of his tyrant on any thought of his that wandered from herself, he began to deny as Hamlet denied, forgetful that such denials fall lightly as rain, but, like a raindrop on the trusty steel, may turn to rust and eat a cruel road.

Marjory Scrope going to and fro to her weary labours of copying the Rospigliosi Aurora for Lord Fingal, saw again once—twice—thrice in one week the tall, slender form of Ioris passing across the Square of the Four Horses, and told herself, with a quickly-throbbing heart, that he was only going to the Quirinal, but saw, despite her longing not to see, that he did not

bear towards the Quirinal, but towards the old, grey, ancient mansion where Etoile lived amidst her frescoes and her flowers.

Marjory, toiling across the last stones of the square in the blast of the stormy Lenten wind, grew sick and pale, grew faint with fear; and as she sat at her work saw the faces of Aurora and the Hours through a mist, and sketched the horses of the chariot out of drawing.

As much as her work would let her have liberty to do—for Lord Fingal was in haste for his copy, and she in haste to see the cheque for it—she kept a spy's watch upon the old palace by the Colonna gardens; she talked with its porter, she went past it in daybreak and dusk; she longed to find something, she hardly knew what, something, anything, against the woman that dwelt there. It was so bitterly hard to her: she had to copy all day and get a pittance at the end of her labours; or if she got more, knew that more was only given out of charity and sympathy, because she was a marquis's granddaughter and thought praiseworthy so to work for her living. And Etoile—half an hour's

rough sketch in charcoal from the hand of Etoile would fetch two hundred guineas in any city of Europe!

As she went to and fro across the square, in sunlight or showers, the horses of Etoile would bespatter her with dust or with mud, or she fancied they did, if they passed by twenty yards off. Watching the door, she would see Ioris pass through with the easy and accustomed air of one who goes where he is expected and is certain of his reception. Sometimes as she went home, with her portfolio under her arm, as evening fell she would see Etoile come out to go to some dinner at Princess Vera's, or some informal 'at home' at the Palazzo Farnese. She watched and watched, and hated and hated.

She was a prudent creature under all her bitterness; otherwise she could have torn her copy of the Aurora into shreds with hatred of herself for having to sit copying there whilst this woman, who could make her hundreds in an hour, sat doing nothing amidst her palms and hyacinths and smiling in the face of Ioris!

'I see you often in the Montevallo, Io,' she

was imprudent enough to say once, biting her lip, and relying on their long intimacy.

Ioris looked surprised and unconscious.

'But certainly—I go often to the Quirinal.'

'It is not the Quirinal that I meant,' she said sharply. '"You go to Etoile.'

Ioris, who was smoking, looked at his cigarette and shrugged his shoulders.

'But seldom. One cannot always refuse; she does me the honour to ask me things about Rome —she is composing a Roman picture. She has been spoilt by her world—she is used to rule, and is easily put out.'

He said it very tranquilly: it was his impulse always to slip on his velvet mask before interrogation.

Marjory Scrope looked at him sharply. He only partially deceived her.

'What does it matter to you whether she is put out or not, since you dislike her?'

Ioris shrugged his shoulders once more.

'*Mah!* she is a woman; one cannot be rude. You know I never say no. Do not you and Joanna always reproach me with my weakness?'

Marjory laughed uneasily.

'I suppose she is going to paint *you* in the Roman picture and make you celebrated for ever?'

'*Trop d'honneur!*' said Ioris, with a careless smile. 'No, it is purely archæological details that I give her. You know I like to trace the old ways under the new. I am of a little use to her—not much.'

'And what is this—archæological—picture?'

'The chariot of Tullia,' said Ioris, with ready invention. He knew the invention was safe: his questioner would not dare to question the great artist as to her future works.

Marjory looked at him, and still was but half-deceived.

'I do not believe the least in this archæology. I believe you are in love with her!' she said, with a nervous and anxious laugh.

'I have never even liked her,' said Ioris, with an admirable *nonchalance*.

'Nor have I,' he thought to himself, 'because I have always loved her.'

Why would they question him? They de-

served to get a lie for their pains. And indeed people who ask a man about a woman do merit this punishment.

'What's all this about an archæological pic ture, Io?' said the Lady Joan fiercely a day later. 'Marjory says you are helping Etoile about a new painting. Is it true? Because, if it's true, I won't have it. She'll be putting your portrait in it—I know she will. What do you mean by going there? And I thought she did not paint at all; that the doctors had forbidden her. What lies she tells!'

'Calm yourself, *ma chère*,' said Ioris, with a tranquillising gesture. 'There is no falsehood at all. She is thinking out a great picture; studying details for it, that is all. Where is the harm?'

'Oh, I suppóse she wants to paint something because she makes all her money by painting,' said the Lady Joan, with unutterable scorn: she herself sold what other people painted, which is a much loftier occupation. 'But what do *you* want to have anything to do with it for?' she continued, still fiercely. 'It's ridiculous going there, wasting your time with her. She's horribly rude

to *me*—refused my last two invitations, and scarcely took the trouble to make even an excuse. I wanted her to meet Victor Louche. I believe she's afraid of all he knows about her.'

Ioris, in an imprudent moment, laughed contemptuously, and Lady Joan, infuriated, continued:

'I won't have you go! If she can't paint her pictures alone, let 'em go unpainted. She never did paint 'em alone; I always told you so. She always got men to help her—always. She's laying a trap—I can see that. She never comes near me now; scarcely calls. After all that I've done for her! I can see through her drift well enough. Does she dare talk of me to you?'

'*Mais, ma chère!*—as if I should allow anyone to profane your name to me!'

'Profane fiddlesticks!' cried Lady Joan, in a fury. 'I'm certain she knows; I'm certain she guesses.'

Ioris was silent. It was a delicate subject.

'You wouldn't go near her if you respected me,' said Lady Joan, more and more in a fury. 'I knew what she thought that first day up at

Fiordelisa. I could see it in her eyes. I dare say she's gone and written to my father. It is disgraceful. You have no decency, Io, and no sense, to go and see that woman, and sit with her and talk over *me*. Oh, it is no use your saying anything. Archæology! Rubbish! Whenever did you care about archæology? You care about a new face, a trick of manner, a way of looking, as if the earth and everybody on it were dust and dirt and muck and mire! That's new, and takes your fancy, and you forget all my sacrifices, all I have endured, all I have risked, all I have——'

Hysterics choked her.

Ioris rose and paced the chamber.

'This is absurd, intolerable!' he muttered, half-aloud. He was tempted to fling off his mask and throw it at her feet for good and aye.

'Is it absurd that you think an adventuress an angel?' she screamed, with a shrill hiss.

'I think no woman an angel—who can who has had the happiness to live with you?' he interrupted her, with a chill laugh that barbed the dubious compliment and sent it home through the triple mantle of her vanity.

'Oh, no, I never claim to be one,' she said bitterly; 'I leave such pretensions for those who have more wit to paint their wings than I have; for those who fool you with childlike eyes and the seriousness of a would-be Muse, and some paltry talk of the Greek gods and heroes. When it is for her you neglect me—forget me—insult me——'

'Who has insulted you? When do you ever let yourself be forgotten? What is the use of my coming to you? You only receive me with reproach and reprimand,' said Ioris, taking refuge in answering anger, and letting escape him a touch of all the sombre irritation of which his soul was full. 'What do you require that I do not give up? Is there any moment of my time my own? You even claim to know my thoughts better than I know them. Do I ever rebel? Do I take my freedom, as other men would? *Ma chère*, be reasonable. You treat me like a spaniel: you chain me and you cuff me. Cannot you be content? I am your dog, if it be not an affront to any dog to say so.'

He spoke with the bitter though subdued

detestation of himself, and of his bondage, that day by day was growing sterner and stronger in him; and the mere glimpse of any such passion in him filled her with terror.

If he had only read her aright, he might with ease have been her master.

This was not the first of such scenes that the last few weeks had witnessed; not the first muttering of that storm of revolt which some day or another she felt would burst above her head and wrench from her not only himself but—Fiordelisa. She grew terrified; her breath failed her before the vision that for a moment flashed before her eyes. Had she wrung the galled withers once too often? Had she strained a strand too far the ever-yielding rope?

She fell at his feet in a tempest of emotion, rage, fear, suspicion, apprehension, all seething in her, as angry seas seethe under the lightning and the hurricane of a storm.

Vast is the power of turbulence; it will conquer when all that is holy, that is tender, that is long-suffering, that is noble, shrink away unheard and disregarded.

Ioris might have ruled her had he read her aright; but alas! he missed the occasion to seize the mastery. He let her rave on, and drooped his head to the storm.

When she was somewhat calmer he kissed her hands.

'*Carissima mia*, you excite yourself needlessly,' he said, and bent his knee beside her. 'If it be as you fancy—if anyone divine your amiable goodness to me—the more need is it to lull such suspicions by not displaying any jealousy of me: you must see that, do you not? Be tranquil.'

'You will never go to her, then—never?' muttered his tyrant, clenching her hands on his wrist.

'Never; or at the utmost merely as much as courtesy and caution require,' said Ioris. 'Pray be tranquil, *mia cara!* These scenes distress me unspeakably. There is no kind of ground for them.'

She grew calmer and was convinced.

Ioris as he knelt there felt none of the composure that he affected so admirably. His temples

ached with the scream of her voice, his pulses thrilled with apprehension and anger, his heart beat with a stifled shame and a stifled rage. He was tempted by a great longing to fling off the mask and tell the truth and bid her do her worst.

But he hesitated; the old habit of subserviency to her was on him heavy and paralysing. He believed also that he was vitally necessary to her, the very breath of her life; he was reluctant to strike her so dread a blow; he was afraid to rise and say to his tyrant, 'I will be free!'

'Another time,' he said to himself: another time he would confess to her that his allegiance was a lifeless thing of habit and of duty. Another time he would say to her, 'Love is not in our command, and mine is dead.'

'Another time.'

And he murmured words that were false, and spent caresses that were joyless and faithless, and knew that he was false to his fairest faith, yet had not strength to unclasp the hands that held him and put back the mouth that wooed him, and say the simple truth: 'Our love is dead!'

He left the house ill at ease and ashamed,

conscious that he had been disloyal to all the best emotions of his nature; feeling as though he had for ever lost the right to look into the clear, proud eyes of Etoile.

Yet he fancied he would have done more wrong had he risen up boldly and told the truth to his mistress, and broken from the unholy bonds that held him.

The curious honour of his world and of his sex was about him like the fetters of an encircling serpent about the living flesh, paralysing action and numbing and deadening life. The woman that was worthless in his sight was sacred. The woman that was sacred in his sight was sacrificed.

He fancied this was honour; and if the men of his generation could have been put to the vote they would have declared it honour too.

For men of the world have set up an idol called honour which is a false idol, very foolish, very clumsy, very cruel, yet to which they immolate themselves with a sincerity and a stupidity that are touching, and immolate oftentimes those dear to them.

According to this idol the fiat goes forth that a man may blamelessly desert an innocent woman, but not a guilty one; he may break the heart of the bruised lily, and no harm done; but he must bide the brunt with perjured Guinevere, or be man-sworn. It is curious reasoning and illogical, and the results brutal and often tragical; but men in adhering to it are quite honest.

It is this honesty which women sharp of sight and keen of execution turn with ruthless skill to their own purposes.

Men are never as clever as they think themselves, and are generally much better than other people suppose them.

'Ioris is in love with Etoile!' said his mistress, showing her white teeth in a harsh laugh, but airing her indifference, as she rang the changes on the same subject a little later the very next day, when, as it chanced, Etoile was carelessly named in her presence by Douglas Græme after luncheon.

'What folly!' said Ioris, angrily; and his heart beat thickly, for he felt once again a coward and untrue.

'I believe you are!' she cried, glad to say so, since her cousin, Douglas Græme, was by to hear, 'I do believe you are! Well, if it be so, *gare à vous*! I should not wish to see any friend of mine in her toils.'

Douglas Græme opened his blue eyes wide.

'You mean the great painter that I have seen at your house? Oh, she is as cold as ice; everyone knows that; she is quite indifferent to men. If Ioris——'

'Has touched her, he has a marvellous conquest, I suppose you mean?' said the Lady Joan with impatience. 'How can you believe such trash? Innocent! So is a flower-pot innocent; but when the crickets and mice tumble into it, where it's set to trap them covered over with moss, I don't fancy they think so, do they? Do you believe she made all the money she spends by her pictures? Good heavens, Douglas, where have you lived? Are you in short frocks still?'

'I do not understand,' began her cousin, who looked bewildered.

Ioris grew a shade paler.

'It would, at least, be well to respect your

father's friend and your own guest,' he said in a low tone; but there were a sternness and a menace in his voice which were new from his lips and strange to her ear.

'A woman my father's seen once or twice in a few studios!' she said, with boundless scorn. 'How can you call her his friend?'

'Because she is so.'

'She is nothing of the kind! She is the daughter of that old beast, Voightel, and my father is a fool about anything that Voightel——'

'You said the other day she was found in the streets.'

'So she was. Voightel never noticed her till she grew famous—if you call it famous—thanks to David Istrion in his dotage.'

'Is all the world in its dotage, then, also?'

'Very likely it is. What are her pictures after all? Nothing but would-be Gérômes; rank imitations of all his bestialities. Tom Tonans says so. They wouldn't *hang* them even in England.'

'It is a pity—for England.'

Ioris rose as he said so and lighted a cigar.

Lady Joan burst into a boisterous laugh.

'You see he's in love, don't you, Douglas?'

'He has been so a long time, my cousin; we all are,' said Douglas Græme gallantly, being desirous of preventing a scene.

'Stuff!' said his cousin, too violently irritated in her own soul to be pacified with any such mere compliment. 'He is in love with Etoile; you see he is in love with Etoile. He frowns if one says a syllable, and can't talk of her without turning pale or red. Poor Io! Can't you find anybody better to erect into an angel than a Paris Sappho that has knocked about Bohemian ateliers all her days, and gets herself up in intellect and innocence to please you, as she drapes her lay figure in calico and calls it Pudicitia? Do be more sensible, pray. Take some Vittoria Colonna of your own nationality: you can know all about *her*.'

Ioris shrugged his shoulders and turned his back.

'Your interest in me is most benevolent,' he said, for the benefit of Douglas Græme. 'But I am not in the peril you imagine, *foi*

d'honneur. And, if you will allow me to correct you—Sappho did not paint.'

Ioris went away angered deeply and a little ashamed of himself.

He felt as the faithless follower felt when the cock crew; as all feel who let a treachery pass by unpunished and condoned by a cowardly silence. He felt disloyal with a twofold disloyalty. As for the slander, it was the mere venomous breath of a jealous woman; so he said to himself. He could have laughed aloud at it, it seemed so ludicrous to him, so clumsy, so poor. Yet it clung about him like a noxious vapour that hangs in the air.

You cannot strike the vapour, nor seize it, nor see it; yet it is there, spoiling all sweet genial weather and flower-scented breezes, and making the glad day sickly.

The lie seemed to buzz about him like a mosquito stinging in the sunshine.

Lady Joan, left alone, sat lost in thought. On calm reflection she was convinced that her friend Marjory's apprehensions resulted only from the fogs and fancies of her friend Marjory's

brain, whose weakness of hopeless jealousy she knew.

'Of course he cares for nobody but me,' she thought. She filled the universe to herself; she was convinced that she filled it equally to him. She was easily lulled, easily blinded, because her immeasurable vanity was for ever between her and any truth.

She was envious of Etoile, she distrusted the influence of Etoile, and she hated her for her glance, for her words, for her modes of life, for her scarcely veiled contempt—for anything and everything—as only one woman can hate another.

But Lady Joan, though Cleopatra in her idle hours, was not a Cleopatra to whom Mark Antony was all. She was a Cleopatra to whom her ships, her freights, her slaves, her allies, and her merchandise in general were always more than her hero; and at this moment she was a Cleopatra overburdened with many prosaic anxieties.

She had caught fire as easily as tow held to a match to the incendiary whispers of her friend, and had flamed fiercely as petroleum; but the flame had soon died down, and only burned dully

among the embers of sullen fears. Ioris gone, and Douglas Græme also, she grew a prey to more solid and more terrestrial anxieties than those of passion. Her bureau was inundated with papers and her head was filled with plans; acres of arithmetic spread out before her eyes, and reams of correspondence, with telegrams in cypher, aroused and tore her from the preoccupation of amorous doubts.

Beyond everything she was a woman of business.

She went across to her husband's little sanctum and opened the door.

'Robert, come out and talk over my idea.'

Mr. Challoner, who was busy writing, took his eyeglasses off his nose and emerged from his den.

'It is of little use to talk,' he said, gloomily; 'it is time to act.'

'Of course it is. That's just what I want to see you about. One ought to go there directly.'

'One ought,' said Mr. Challoner, still deep in gloom. 'Besides, you must not give any more dinners; really the cost——'

'I'm sure we've everything from Fiordelisa,

except the fish,' said his wife, 'and the foreign wines and the sweetmeats. And I shall go on giving dinners till I go—if I do go. People are nasty the moment you don't stop their mouths with a dinner. What do you think, by the way, Marjory told me this morning about Etoile?—that Io's in love with her! Did you ever know such an idiotic absurdity?'

Mr. Challoner was too wrapped in gloom to smile, though the ghost of what might in happier circumstances have been a smile came upon his face.

'I saw it coming on long ago; indeed, the very night she came here,' he replied tranquilly; and he did, even in his gloom, rather enjoy saying that.

His wife's eyes flashed fire.

'Oh, did you?' she said roughly. 'You're always very clever in seeing through a millstone, and never see an inch before your own nose. Io's just told me he can't endure her.'

'It does not interest me either way,' said Mr. Challoner, drearily. 'Did you call me to tell me that?'

'Of course not,' said Lady Joan, searching amongst her cypher telegrams and her acres of arithmetic.

'I want you to read all these, and decide whether you think we can do it.'

Mr. Challoner grumbled, fixed his glasses, and busied himself in her papers.

She was as great as that Emperor of Byzantium who ruled the East and the West, yet busied himself selling his hens' eggs and bought diamonds with the proceeds.

Were it a question of five francs for a coffee-cup or five millions for a concession, she was equal to either fortune. Nobody could say that she despised trifles. She might be marking out a royal subsidy in her meditations, but if anybody came in that wanted a length of lace she devoted herself to the lace. She really ought to have been a greater woman than she was; but then, alas! her vanity obscured her vision: it was a *myopia* which impeded her way to entire success.

Mr. Challoner knew this very well, and on occasions even said it—flatly. Then they had

a battle-royal. But they did not have a battle now, as he gave all his mind to her telegrams and arithmetic.

She was at this time almost too much overwhelmed with business, dearly as she loved it. She was sending Titian's 'Choice of Paris' off to the most puissant Imperial Government of Pickelhaube, for which an Inspector of Fine Arts, more enlightened than the Russians are, had just purchased it. She felt that she would miss the eight-feet-high nudities behind her dinner-table sadly, but she obeyed beyond anything the injunction, 'Put money i' thy purse, put money i' thy purse.' She was also shipping off several Old Masters to a loan collection in Edinburgh. Her name looked well in the catalogues, and the loan meant generally an eventual sale to some wealthy body or another visiting the collection. Again, and first and foremost, she had a great transaction in meditation.

Lady Joan loved transactions; she always found them lucrative. 'Keep on turning money: some will always stick to your fingers,' said a capitalist once; and she thought the same.

The present transaction was no less a one than the meditated transfer of the *Società Italiana Inglese del Ponte Calabrese-Siciliano* from one body of shepherds to another.

The Duke of Oban had withdrawn from the presidency, in disgust and with strong language, expressed in rough Doric; the sheep that were as silly as swine were rushing down their slope with such headlong haste and uproar that all the world could hear them, and Mr. Challoner with his crook could do nothing to stop them. The workmen down on the coast, by the sunken piles and the devouring sea, had been paid for some weeks at the cost of Ioris; she began to foresee that if things went on at this rate Fiordelisa would be imperilled, let her shriek as she would.

Lying awake at nights between her evening's cotillons and her morning's *bric-à-brac*, she had turned it over and over all carnival in her busy brain, and now that with Lent things were really at a climax and could not well be worse anyhow, her busy brain had cleverly hit on a transfer.

If a transfer could only be accomplished

everything would be saved (except the sheep that were as silly as swine), and everything would be changed (except Mr. Challoner's crook). Now, in the whole length and breadth of the financial world, as on the turf, there is nothing so difficult as to 'raise a dead 'un in the betting;' nothing so arduous as to float once more into the ambient air a bubble that has already collapsed and burst.

It is quite easy to inflate a new commercial balloon; nothing easier. A door-plate, a good name or two, and plenty of advertisements; these are all that are necessary. There need be nothing behind the door-plate, nobody behind the names; the advertisements will do all that is enough, if only the thing be new; quite new. Now, the Messina bridge was not new; it was an exploded rocket, a pulled cracker, a melted *sorbet*, an umbrella turned inside out; anything, indeed, that is limp, collapsed, exhausted, and done for; but the energy of the Lady Joan was not to be daunted by these facts. Indeed, she cared very little for facts at any time.

Facts were for the odious people that carried dates at their fingers' ends and a list of pottery marks in their pockets, who went to museums to verify their history, and to their bankers to know the wisdom of any enterprise: she was above such little trivialities of common sense as facts.

So she resolved to set afloat on the markets of the world a transfer.

'But, *mia carissima*,' objected Mimo Burletta, in a simile born of his trade, 'the poor pot is dropped, broken, all to pieces, you cannot make it whole again! You cannot.'

'Stuff!' said the Lady Joan. 'Don't you join 'em with white-of-egg, and paint 'em all over when *your* pots break? So shall I.'

Mimo was silent; he was aware of the excellence of the process. Occasionally, horrid people called connoisseurs would scrape with a penknife, and discover the white-of-egg, and the paint that was over the glaze, instead of under it. But then connoisseurs are few. He smiled at them when he met them as the Romans at death, but he never offered to sell them anything. Were there financial connoisseurs on the Ex-

changes? Mimo did not know. He felt muddled, and did not venture on any more remonstrance.

'She is a great creature,' he thought to himself; there were always the pigs to show that, the lovely pink pigs slowly maturing to succulent bacon, in the patent English galvanized iron pigsties out at Fiordelisa.

And she prepared to join her broken pot and paint it.

She projected a transfer, *i.e.*, the same plant, the same projects, the same society, but a new purchase by new purchasers, an issue of new shares, and an entirely new prospectus.

Modern enterprises mainly consist of a prospectus, as a tadpole of its head.

She also intended to have a new name. She meant to call her piles in the sand, &c., 'The Mediterranean Company for the facilitation of Communication in the South.'

This was beautifully vague, and would also allow for the driving in of other piles into many other places on the sea shores of Europe and Africa.

Lady Joan had not lived in Damascus without

learning a good deal about speculation. In Asia and Africa speculators of all kinds are as many as the mosquitoes. In the wasted garden of the world English bankers, French financiers, Greek and Italian and German *agents d'affaires*, Jews of all sorts and sizes, fatten there as fatten the locusts, and like the locusts devour everything ere harvest be due. The dream-cities of the 'Arabian Nights' are the stews in which the children of Israel gorge, and the splendid and lovely lands that were once the envy of Alexander, and the amaze of Herodotus, are now in their misery delivered over to the oppression and the extortion of tyrants, far viler than Pharaoh or Mithridates, Tamerlane or Aurungzebe, tyrants whose sceptre is a pen, whose throne is a greasy office stool, and whose symbol is a pair of shears.

Far and wide, from the Fellah of Egypt to the Arab of Lebanon, from the Negro that slaves in Soudan to the Buddhist that toils among the canebrakes on Irrawaddy, one and all bend their backs to the rod of the European adventurer, one and all are stript, and cheated, and plundered and sacrificed, to put money in the purses of con-

tractor and commission agent; one and all pay by the sweat of their brow and the famine of their bodies for the curse of civilization that falls across them, devastating as drought, blighting as the close clouds of locusts when the sun grows dark with them.

Prostrate the East lies, to be strangled and sheared by the West.

How dare it complain? The adventurers bring it in return a steam-engine and a religion.

Lady Joan had not so long watched this shearing process without learning more or less how to do it, and getting a pair of scissors if not a pair of shears.

Indeed, so thoroughly congenial was the East to her by reason of the perpetual clipping which is possible there, that it was a very great pity she ever had left it. Italy, since it has enjoyed freedom, has felt the shears a good deal, but it is never so possible to wield them incessantly in the temperate zone. People talk, and things get into the papers in Europe; in Asia you are beyond all that.

At this juncture Lady Joan sighed for Asia: *on revient toujours à ses premiers amours.* In Asia the workmen never would have dared to squeal for wages; there would have been the *koubash* on their backs, and spirited pashas to appeal to, who would have known better than to give a hearing to a lot of diggers of the sand.

She sighed for Asia, but she had no necromancer's wand to transport Messina beyond the Dardanelles; so she turned her thoughts, *faute de mieux*, to London.

Only to carry out her intentions it was absolutely necessary that she should go to London, and this at once, if her scheme were to have any chance of prosperity.

There is no place like London for finding the white-of-egg that will adhere, and the paint that will stick on the glaze, of financial pots that are broken.

Above all, beyond all, and most odious of all, Ioris must know nothing of it till the mended pot was successfully painted and sold. Ioris, on occasion, had odd, quixotic caprices. Ioris would almost certainly be for leaving the shreds of the

pot untouched, whilst, as best he could, he would essay to save the sheep that were silly as the Gadarene swine. Ioris, if he knew her scheme, would inevitably, in one of his idiotic impulses, spoil all.

This was what she had resolved as she had lain awake after her carnival balls—restless, angry, and disturbed.

She knew how to paint the pot, being conversant with all the ins and outs and technicalities of business, and having a passion for speculation, which was the one kindred sentiment that linked her and Mr. Challoner together in the one isolated harmony of their lives.

She knew, or thought she knew, the kind of people to float it; she knew, or thought she knew, the puppets needful to replace the Duke of Oban and the rest of the indispensable marionnettes. She took her husband into her confidence, and he, otherwise willing that Ioris should be ruined, was very unwilling to cease to be a shepherd himself, and very cordially approved of all her intentions.

'Do you think we can do it?' she said this

morning, as her 'idea' ploughed a slow way through the heavy earth of Mr. Challoner's more stolid intelligence, backed with letters from trusty correspondents in various commercial dens and rows of figures drilled like Prussian regiments.

Mr. Challoner gazed drearily and solemnly into vacancy, and laid the mass of papers on his knee that related to the mending of the broken pot.

'Yes, I think you can,' he said with the cautious utterance of a man who never committed himself. 'Ye—es, I think you can—it promises; but I suppose you see very well that it will necessitate your going to London.'

Across his wife's face fell a gloom deep as that of a moonless night.

'Of course I know I must,' she said sullenly, and with a staunch and heroical firmness.

The obligation to go away lay on her soul like lead. It harassed her night and day. It haunted her like a bad dream, but she was resolved to brave everything, and go. Mended and painted the pot must be, and nobody could do it but herself.

When inclination and interest pulled different ways, she was far too heroic a woman not to make inclination walk the plank and disappear. The Venusberg was all very well, but Capel Court and Cannon Street were better. Besides, her Venusberg was safe enough; she would put a padlock on it, and leave her watch-dog on guard.

She was quite of Lady Cardiff's opinion, that Love was the bonbons and olives of the banquet of life. Money was the soup and fish and the *rôti*. Still, the necessity to go away harassed her soul as the steam-plough harrows the wild Highland waste.

It was absolutely necessary to go to London, and go to London without him. She passed feverish days and sleepless nights, torn between desire and dread: desire to go and make her projects realities, dread to leave him behind her near the woman she hated.

If she did not go, she saw that Fiordelisa might be swamped with the piles in the sands by the sea, and Ioris without Fiordelisa would not have been half Ioris, nay, no Ioris at all, as he

stood in her measure. Being forced to lose either Ioris or Fiordelisa, she would unhesitatingly have let Ioris go. Passion was strong with her, but never so strong as self-interest. The Dame du Comptoir outbalanced the Cleopatra.

Nevertheless, the conflict of the two was tough and bitter, and rent her sorely as they wrestled. She began to grow worn, hectic, and haggard; in these days of indecision she became nervous, restless, sullen, hysterical, by turns. Ioris was touched with remorse at what he thought was a carking anxiety for his welfare; and Mr. Challoner, who for once was honoured with being in her secret, thought it advisable to make a few visits all by himself in society with a sombre air, like a newly-made widower's, and hint that decline had always been terribly fatal to her family; his wife would over-exert herself; alas! yes, she would; her energy was so great, and her physical strength not proportionate to it.

'A most devoted husband,' said Society, and thought he expressed himself very nicely.

'An excellent person; most attached couple,' said General Desart, standing on the club steps, whilst Mrs. Desart was at home having her eyebrows painted on her lovely brow by the Duke of Buonretiro.

CHAPTER XXXI.

LENT passed and the weather grew warm; in after years when they looked back to the Lenten time it was beautiful and embalmed, as with the scent of buried blossoms, and the sounds of music for ever stilled, in the hearts of both Ioris and Etoile.

It was the true and perfect springtide of the year, when Love walks amongst the flowers, and comes a step nearer what it seeks with every dawn.

Without Love, spring is of all seasons cruel; more cruel than all frost and frown of winter.

As this springtide grew, and with it grew the warmth, and the mountain sides changed to a

dewy greenness, and the plains were all a sea of grasses and of flowers, she moved from her old palace to a villa as old outside the gates, set in a grand old garden, and with the reedy Anio running by its walls. Ioris found the place for her, persuaded her to rent it, charged himself with facilitating the transport there of her bronzes, tapestries, and canvases, and was glad that the copyist of the Aurora would no longer be able to spy upon him when he should pass up on to these old grey terraces.

His mistress heard of this change with anger; it bewildered and annoyed her; go away herself she fancied that she must; she would fain have had the woman in whom she was vaguely conscious of a rival, away also.

'Is it true that she has taken Rocaldi?' she said sharply to Ioris.

Ioris looked up: 'Who has taken Rocaldi?'

'What affectation, as if you didn't know! They say *you* took it for her——'

'Pardon me, I forgot; yes, I believe she has taken it; but it is no doing of mine; indeed, I told her it was not thought very healthy.'

He looked so indifferent, and spoke so tranquilly, that his listener as usual was deceived.

'Marjory was mistaken and so was I; he does not care,' she thought to herself; aloud she said with a laugh:—'It is on the road to Fiordelisa. I suppose that counterbalances its unhealthiness; she is certainly bent on your subjugation, Io!'

'*Ma chère!* What folly!'

He had passed all that morning in the old neglected gardens of Rocaldi with Etoile, and in the stately melancholy rooms, arranging her pictures, planning changes for her, directing workmen, listening to the birds that filled the ilex thickets, and flew about the palms.

But he was not afraid; Etoile and she seldom met, and he had no longer to fear intimacy between them; moreover, he knew that Etoile never spoke of him: it would not be like her nature or her ways.

'*Vous l'avez voulu!*' he thought to himself as he saw how completely his mistress was blinded; she had brought it on her own head; she had kept him in a subserviency, and demanded

from him a surrender of his time, and of his thoughts, which no man will give without being driven into the self-compensation of concealment. Time and thought, like all his other possessions, were signed and sealed away into her hands, but it was only human nature that he should rebel, and take his own out of both time and thought unknown to her. His life had been pervaded by her like a room by the smell of camphor wood. Open the window, bring in flowers, burn pastilles, throw rosewater about, do what you will, there is the smell of the camphor wood still. To escape it you must go out to the fresh air. He had done so.

The fault was hers.

She had made passion into a police sergeant, and put love under lock and key. Passion betrayed and Love escaped her: it was only in the laws of human nature.

But she did not know it.

To Ioris, as to every Italian, mystery and silence were the very essence of Love's life; to steal away when the lark sings, is the joy of every lover since the days of Romeo. His mis-

tress, who had called to all the crowing cocks at dawn to see him on her balcony, had thrown aside the sweetest spell of power.

The lover in him was once more awake, and he deceived his gaoler as the lover ever does.

Meanwhile Etoile remained unconscious of the labyrinth she entered, conscious only of the fatal paradise of an artist's dreams.

Etoile thought very little about the world at any time, and much of its evil was written in a dead tongue to her.

Of course nobody would have believed that. Nevertheless so it was.

A woman whose chief companionship has been that of wise men, will keep an absolute honesty of mind, because she will have been in contact with honest minds that would not contaminate her own. Women are the chief corrupters of women. Men, unless they are very bad, and there are not many that are so, in their intercourse with a woman whom they find without guile, will, when they speak of evil, bid her know it as the base nettle, which has no power to sting the bold and innocent hand that grasps

to cast it forth. Women will smile and say the nettle is difficult to pluck—oh, yes, no doubt—but then there is a flower inside it—only touch and see.

Passions and sins had been revealed to her. She had seen the human pulses all laid bare by the anatomists of three thousand years of human culture. She had heard the thinker muse aloud, the cynic sneer, the poet sigh, over the conflict of the beast and of the god which, in its various shapes, is yet the same in all the human histories, be they under the law of Nim, or Vishnu, or Aphrodite, or Christ.

She was not ignorant of evil, but innocent of it.

As women of religion, with the red cross on their breasts, bend over the wide war-wounds of naked men, so she beheld corruption, yet remained aloof from it; knew it and yet knew it not; beheld and heard of it, yet was unsullied by it as a child may walk clean through a lazaretto.

The world hardly understands this difference.

It cannot comprehend that the awakening

of the intelligence and the sleep of the senses can long be co-existent.

Shakespeare knew this truth. Goethe did not. Gretchen has no middle way betwixt a stupid ignorance and an absolute surrender. But Imogen knows well the perils of her path, but with clear eyes and with firm feet goes onward. The women of Shakespeare are all innocent, with the noblest, fairest, truest faith and form of innocence, but they are not ignorant of evil. Of all the poets' women they are the most perfect. But they know the woe of the world that is around them, and, when the hour comes, the passion.

But if a living woman comes, who has, like Imogen, her drawn sword yet her child's heart, the world will never believe in her.

She will shake the rock of its disbelief as vainly as Desdemona shook Othello's. Faithful to one alone as Desdemona she may be, but like Desdemona she must die, deemed to her latest breath a wanton. And when she lies dead they will say so still. For the world, not having Othello's love, has not his penitence.

'Aren't you going away at all, then?' said the Lady Joan sharply of Etoile, meeting her one day by chance in the Borghese woods during Holy Week.

'I think not,' she murmured coldly. 'I have taken an old villa outside the gates; I go to remain there in a few days.'

'So Io told me; Rocaldi isn't it? I am sure I am most charmed,' said Lady Joan, remembering herself. 'You must come to see us very often at Fiordelisa. We all go up to Fiordelisa in a week or so for the summer. Rocaldi lies on the way to Fiordelisa; I think Io said so.'

Then coldly they bade each other good-day.

'Isn't it indecent the way she lives?' said the Lady Joan fiercely, as she passed onward.

'I don't see any indecency,' said Mr. Challoner, looking about him as if it were a thing to be detected in the air.

'You never see an inch before your face,' said his wife. 'Of course I'll never let her into Fiordelisa, if she stay here a hundred years, rude, insolent, ungrateful, abominable creature that she is!'

'What has she done, except fascinate Ioris?' said Mr. Challoner, with a face of gloom, but an inward complacency.

'Fascinate a fiddlestick!' said his wife, with consummate scorn. 'As if I cared whatever fool he may make of himself!—besides I know he can't bear her; she disgusts him; he has said so fifty times; he hates notorious women.'

'You cannot properly call her notorious,' said Mr. Challoner, who loved nothing better than to pick at straws with his wife, 'the word notorious means——'

'I don't want to be taught out of a dictionary by you,' said the Lady Joan. 'It's enough for me that she refuses my invitations, and never even calls on me, except by leaving a card; when you think all we did for her, all our kindness, all our hospitality—a woman that really it is horrible to think has ever crossed our threshold, when one knows what she is——'

'It is inconsistent to be annoyed with her for crossing it no more, then,' said Mr. Challoner,

who was in a contradictory and boorish humour, having come from a melancholy perusal of the reports of the Società Italiana-Inglese.

'Oh, you and Io think her right, of course. You'd both see me insulted and trampled on, and never get out of your chairs! You're just like my father——'

'H-us-sh!' said Mr. Challoner, who thought a scene would be inconvenient in the well-filled Borghese woods with the scarlet royal liveries passing. 'H-us-sh! What does it matter, one way or the other? Nothing easier than to say we made a mistake in receiving her. My love, here is Lady Norwich. Dear Lady Norwich——'

That night Etoile went to a reception at the Palazzo Farnese, which was one of the many eminent houses that did not open its doors to the Lady Joan. The reception was given for the Emperor and Empress of Amazonia, high and Catholic sovereigns, in their travels. It was now Easter, and Rome had still a fashionable foreign crowd at its command, though the crowd were on the eve of dispersion to northern lands, to the glories of Marlborough House and the

Orleans Club, to the grand stand of Chantilly and the pavilion of Trouville.

Pasqua, though shorn of its pontifical splendours, still is Pasqua in Rome; and the fashionable crowd was waiting for its final functions, and enjoying a few last farewell-fêtes meanwhile.

Ioris came late, very late: he had escaped from the Casa Challoner by the plea of a Prince's command, which existed only in his imagination, and had left the Lady Joan sitting, sullen and worried, over cypher telegrams and arithmetic, smoking strong Turkish and drinking black coffee.

He came into the beautiful gallery that has no rival in the world; himself looking in unison with the place, pale, graceful, pensive, proud, giving a low bow here, a charming greeting there, grand seigneur in every gesture, as all his forefathers had been before him.

He made his slow, courteous way through the august crowd, where nearly everyone was an acquaintance, and by degrees, without apparent desire or design, approached a woman in a cream-hued dress, made like the gowns of the Marie

woman do to me, or man either? What idle fears! Are you not ashamed to give them any shape in words?'

'Alas!' said Ioris with a sigh and paused; he thought of the base calumnies that his mistress sent forth as serpents dart their tongues, but he shrank from speaking of them. 'I understand that intimacy between you is impossible,' he murmured; 'but the mere empty courtesies of society, the mere forms of friendship, might be more wisely kept up; if you would dine there again, call oftener——'

'I will not.'

Etoile turned suddenly, and her eyes burned for a moment into his with an anger that filled him with admiration, because it was so righteous and so frank.

'When I came to her I did not know what she was. Now I know. I have become your friend; more than your friend; I have your confidence. Perhaps you are wrong to give it; perhaps I am wrong to receive it; perhaps—but so it is. We cannot unsay all that we have said. If she come to me I will receive her, through re-

spect for her father, receive her with all courtesy, but I will not go into her house again—never, never! I will not affect to her to hold her in esteem while in my heart I hold her infamous—I will not! My friendship has never been the empty falsehood of Society; it has never been the secret sneer of conventionality covered with a conventional caress; it shall not be so to her. Could I palm off the lie on her, I should merit any lie that she might tell of me!'

She spoke with force and with emotion; her own inmost sense of her antagonism to this woman made her strive the more to be loyal to her, made her cling the closer to sincerity in her dealings with her.

'You are superb, but you are not of this world,' he said, and kissed her hands with tender wondering eyes.

'I try to be just,' said Etoile wearily, a sense of constraint and concealment began to weigh upon her.

Ioris sighed.

This truthfulness was beautiful to him, because it was so strange, so utterly unlike all that

he had ever known in the women who had influenced his life, but it embarrassed him. He felt —and hated himself for so feeling—that women were easier to deal with who had those instincts of intrigue, those proficiencies in deception, which he had been wont to think inborn in all womanhood.

'Justice is very difficult and very rare,' he said, with hesitation.

'Yes, more difficult, more rare than mercy. But one must be just, even to an enemy, or be base.'

She paused abruptly and coloured, remembering all that it implied to acknowledge his mistress as her foe.

He smiled, well pleased, though troubled.

'You are half a warrior, half a child, and all a muse,' he said tenderly. 'But you are not made for our base and banal world.'

'You have women enough around you that are. Go to them. Will you not?'

She smiled a little as she spoke.

'No.'

'Then do not complain of me.'

'Do I complain?'

Their voices were very low, there was no one near them; the great room was full of the scent of roses; above-head were the gorgeous yet tender hues of frescoes.

Her eyes fell beneath his.

'Why will you talk to me of her?' she said irrelevantly, with pain and with impatience in her voice. 'It is to be false to both her and me. You must know that.'

'I could never be false to *you*,' he murmured, and, as they stood together, stooped till his breath was on her brow and his cheek touched hers.

She grew very pale; he watched the quick, high beating of her heart.

'You are not free to speak so.'

'I will be free!'

They were both silent; beyond the doors there were some movement and subdued murmur of voices. They were no longer alone with the roses; the world, that is the enemy of passion, was about them.

The great empress for whom this Pasqua fête

was given, and who was an amiable old lady in a knitted shawl, and her husband who was driving the host almost to madness by requiring the date and history of every morsel of sculpture and of fresco on the walls and ceilings, were both approaching, with a polite little throng of decorated personages about them.

They wished to see Etoile. She went to be presented to them.

'Dreadful bore!' murmured Lady Cardiff to her as she went. 'However, my dear, you are strong in dates and documents, so perhaps it will not plague you so much as it does his poor Excellency yonder. They should not educate Royalties and Imperialities; they are very much nicer when they can only say how-do.'

Ioris seeing Lady Cardiff's eyes on him, bent down with ardent devotion to a beautiful countrywoman of his own, the Duchess of Ara Cœli.

'I wonder if he is entangling Etoile or disentangling himself,' thought Lady Cardiff, following him with her glance. 'There will be a very great difference. Whichever way he begins,

he will end. I wish I knew him well enough to talk to him, not that one ever does any good in these things—they always have their course like comets, and no one can change it by screaming. But I am afraid—yes I am afraid. He will not be bully enough to get rid of that bully of his. It is an odd thing that men are always over-brutal or over-gentle. I wish Lady Joan had caught a Sir John Brute. Ioris has not enough of the brute. As for *her*, if she do care for him, he ought to be Petrarch and Mirabeau blended. *Our* sort of love will never do for her. Our love is like the moccoletti, the fun consists in setting fire to as many tapers and blowing out as many as ever we can. The passions of the world are only tapers, dipped in petroleum sometimes indeed, but never either the sun or the stars that she dreams of:—don't you think so, Ioris?' she asked suddenly aloud.

'*Plaît-il?*' said Ioris, leaving his duchess.

Lady Cardiff looked at him through her eyeglass.

'I was thinking aloud; a bad habit; I was thinking, not one man in a million can love a

woman like Mirabeau; and not one in ten millions like Petrarch. Now, women like our feminine Raffaelle yonder, want Mirabeaus and Petrarchs, who are not to be found. Failing the suns and the stars, do you think such a woman should be satisfied with the light of a taper?'

He looked annoyed.

'I presume she would be the best judge of the light that would content her!' he said coldly; 'but I should imagine, madame, that she was quite above the need of any light except her own.'

Lady Cardiff smiled.

'I am very glad to hear you say so; you see a good deal of her, I believe—and can tell one. Of course, genius is like the nautilus, all sufficient for itself in its pretty shell, quite at home in the big ocean, with no fear from any storm. But if a wanton stone from a boat passing by breaks the shell, where is the nautilus then? Drowned; just like any common creature! Oh dear, no! I was not thinking of anything in especial. Do tell me who that new woman is in the black and red, with the huge pearls; never

saw her before;—a Roumanian princess? Ah! they are all princesses in Roumania.'

Then Lady Cardiff released him; but he did not return to the duchess.

'Drowned—just like any common creature!'

The words rang in his ears and haunted him. He knew the truth that their figure conveyed. The nautilus shell had ridden on the sea of the world safe and buoyant through the winds of fame and the storm of envy. Was his the hand that should cast the stone from the passing boat, and make that fairy voyage end in wreck and in disaster? Forbid it Heaven!

He was a man thoughtful by nature, though by deliberate choice he often would not think. To the dangers of the course he was pursuing he was wilfully blind, because he did not choose to pause and look close into its peril; but these words shook him to a fuller, franker sense of the thing that he was doing. He was not Petrarch, he was not Mirabeau; but he was the man she loved, and so the maker of her fate; the light that would shed eternal summer about her, or the stone that would sink her in the storm.

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the fire was low on the hearth, the flowers were spreading their sweetness on vacancy.

He took the cashmeres from about her, and his arms enclosed her instead.

'You love me, I love you,' he said softly. 'Make me what you think me; what you wish me—I am yours!'

CHAPTER XXXII.

Some persons passing at that moment down the stairs and corridors of the Farnese were saying to each other, 'What absurdity to suppose that there was anything between Ioris and Etoile! Did you not see him? how coldly he bowed. He seems hardly to know anything of her. Why will people talk nonsense? Besides, you know very well he is entirely *accaparé* by that Englishwoman; oh, yes.'

Lady Cardiff, as she overheard the remark as she also passed down the staircase, smiled to herself. It was the sort of thing that interested her—to watch the drama passing on the stage, and hear the comments of the audience on it at the same time.

'What a *fine mouche* he is!' she thought. 'Well, I will keep their secret, though they don't choose to trust me with it. But a day's secresy here will be an error with his bully—he should be fierce, firm, and frank—but he won't be, not he; I wish he were Petrarch or Mirabeau. My poor nautilus—how long will he leave you serene in your shell, and how much will he understand the harm he does when he breaks it?'

And she went home, and for once had no pleasure in reading her *Figaro* in bed.

'That's what comes of being interested in a creature that feels things; it is catching, like diphtheria,' she thought angrily to herself as she read a column of Villemessant twice over without caring about it; and decided to take a little chloral.

'He won't even know how soon the shell will break; that will be the worst of it,' she thought, as she poured out the drops. 'He has lived so long with a woman as hard as a cocoa-nut.'

The woman who was hard as a cocoa-nut was at that hour, as the carriages sped through the moonlit midnight from the courts of Farnese—

rolling through Rome with a dull thunder that reached her ear and made her angry, because to Farnese she went not herself—sitting alone before her writing table, smoking, sorting her papers and telegrams, and issuing commands to her sleepy, worn-out waiting-woman.

'Have you everything packed for Fiordelisa?' she was saying in conclusion. 'The oxen will be in here early for the boxes; mind that you are ready, that is all; and tell the cook to go up there by sunrise, as soon as he's been to market, because I shall have some people up to luncheon, and he must have a good many things cold and savoury; see you tell him; and let these letters be posted, and give me my bath by eight o'clock, and send somebody round early to the Prince Ioris to tell him to be here by ten, not a second later, and that's all, I think. I'll wear my linsey-woolsey gown to-morrow, and I come back to go to the opera, you know, at night, and you will get out my amber dress and the emeralds for that.'

And she went to her couch and slept in peace though the carriages were still rolling by from Farnese.

In the morning her messenger brought her a pencilled note back; Ioris regretted—apologised —but he was in his room, and could not rise; he had one of his bad headaches. He would endeavour to join her later.

On any other day she would have darted down to his house and made his head ache ten times more severely with her fuss and her remedies and her noise, but that day she was busy, she could only send Mr. Challoner; against Mr. Challoner, Ioris kept his chamber door barred, and sent out word that he was really unwell. She heard, hesitated: should she go herself?—then reflected that he so often had headaches, especially now, and she was overwhelmed with business, and she had promised to drive out Douglas Græme, and Guido Serravalle, and a Lady Blank was to go up and lunch at Fiordelisa of whom there were great hopes in regard to the purchase of a huge oaken altar screen, discovered by Mimo.

She was sorry that he had his headache, because in her rough way she cared for him, but perhaps it was not altogether unfortunate; the

Lady Blank who was to buy the altar screen was a person of prudish and peculiar notions, and there was coming up with her an English Consul, who was a family man, and would bring his young daughters to play lawn-tennis—a bore certainly, but useful when any Lady Blanks were there. Lady Joan regarded the Consul with boundless contempt, as the very poorest limpest threadpaper of a man, but the threadpaper was noted for strong domestic principles and sentiments, and as he played lawn-tennis with his little girls on the grass of Fiordelisa, was a useful pawn on her social chessboard. 'Dear Mr. Dunallan takes his children there, and he never would, you know, if——' said the small gentilities of whom he was chief, whenever the small gentilities had qualms.

When the ponies came to the door and the oxen came to bear these household gods of the Casa Challoner, which it was then wont to carry with them, like the ancient Latins she made up her mind and took her departure for Fiordelisa.

She was in love with Ioris, but the apple

of her eye, the jewel of her treasures, the idol of her heart was Fiordelisa.

Besides she could not lose the chance of selling the altar screen.

So she slashed the ponies and started off, Douglas Græme beside her, her guitar and her gun at her feet, the oxen labouring far behind under the weight of the household gods.

To move something looked respectable, and like ownership of the old grey castle on the hill. Besides some of the household gods were always for sale; a use to which the ancient Latins did not put them.

'Is she gone, Gianino?' asked Ioris of his servant, who had been sent for to be useful for the packing of the gods. 'Yes, Excellence,' said the man, and added under his breath, 'the saints be praised!'

'You may open the blinds,' said Ioris, who was lying on the outside of his bed, and he rose at once.

There was a knot of yellow roses and jessamine in a glass by his bed; they were crushed

and faded flowers, but he put them to his lips, and the sweetness of the most triumphant hour of his life seemed in them.

He was very happy, yet he knew himself in great peril.

The one consciousness heightened the other.

He passed the morning at Rocaldi with Etoile.

She was not yet living there, but often passed the days in the lonely, balmy garden.

The terraces were moss-grown now, the statues mutilated and fallen, the ivy and pimpernel ran in their innocent riot over the unweeded walks, but it was beautiful; walls of thick ilex darkness enclosed it, and here and there tall palms soared up from a wilderness of roses. The cool and lovely summer that comes with April was like a caress upon the land; under all the fresh foliage birds sang, and above-head was a cloudless sky.

'Ah, how I wonder that I could ever live without——'

Etoile sighed amidst it all as only the happy sigh, and left the phrase unended.

Ioris, sitting at her feet on the marble steps of the terrace, smiled, and kissed the hands he held.

'The nautilus sails no more by itself,' he thought, and aloud he said, 'You were but a Muse before; now you are a woman. I have called you down to earth.'

'Is it earth?' she said dreamily. 'Hardly——'

To her it seemed something diviner far.

But with him love was of earth, and did not lift its wings.

> 'Had he seen her first
> She might have made this and that other world
> another world
> For the sick man, but now
> The shackles of an old love straitened him;'

and the baneful influence of long years of bondage was like a sickness in him, body and soul. He was passionately proud of the new power he had gained, of the new bonds that he in turn had woven, of the strength he had found to usurp dominion over a mind by others untameable and beyond human reach.

But triumph and passion are far off the love of which Etoile dreamed. These subtle fires, such as now enclosed her in their warmth and devouring speed, are fires that burn up the soul and then die down.

But of this she was ignorant; she only knew that all existence was transfigured for her, that her past seemed pale and poor as a starved flower on a barren moor; and only now—now, when his hands touched her and his eyes gazed at her, did she awake and live.

'It is terrible,' she said, and grew pale, and was afraid of these new joys that seemed like gods to rule and to destroy.

He only smiled with victorious consciousness. 'Your dreams were the enemies of men. I have made them my prisoners. They will never wander from me now.'

'It is that which is terrible,' she said under her breath, with a vague and sudden sense of that irremediable loss which Love calls gain.

Some dread, like Merlin's dread, passed over her like a chill wind.

'If I fear
Giving you power upon me thro' the charm
That you might play me falsely, having power.
However well you think you love me now
(As sons of kings, loving in pupilage,
Have turn'd to tyrants when they came to power),
I rather dread the loss of use than fame.'

But to him this dread, in her, was sweetest flattery, supreme attestation of his empire, that made him glad with a boy's gladness, proud with a despot's pride. Ioris only smiled and kissed her closed eyelids with his silent lips.

And once more she was blind—and happy.

The lovely day burned itself out in fire, colour like the flush of the rose-laurel flowers spreading itself over the western heavens.

They had been happy.

By common tacit consent they had never spoken of the one who was now the enemy of both.

She loomed in the darkness of their future like a tempest cloud that darkens the fair sky with menace, sure to be fulfilled; but neither remembered her, or if her memory passed over them, would dwell on it. To the woman it seemed so easy for him to close the doors of the grave on

the old ashes of a dead shame, and come forth from it into the bright air of untainted joys, that she thought it outrage to him to speak of such a thing as duty; to the man the effort seemed so difficult, that he would not face its obligation till the sheer hour of need should strike.

To her he had said, 'I will be free.' She would have thought it insult to doubt his word or urge on its fulfilment. To him, its fulfilment looked so hard and hazardous that he drove it from his memory until such time as he should be forced to rise and grapple with the spectre.

To her, it seemed simple as the growth of a field lily, that he should rise from unworthiness and be free; to him it seemed perilous as seizure of an asp, to divorce himself from the snake-like folds of a guilty tie.

So the hours passed, and one name was unspoken between them.

To her it seemed shameful,—to him it seemed loathsome—to utter it.

At sunset he took his leave of her. She did not ask him whither he went.

They loved each other; that seemed to Etoile to shut out for ever from them the baseness of suspicion, the unworthiness of doubt.

But at the last moment, when his cheek was against hers in his farewell, she murmured to him—

'You will tell her the truth—now?'

'Yes.'

He murmured back the word on her lips.

He went; and left her to the dreams that henceforth were his captives, her hands lightly clasped behind her head, her eyes closed, her lips parted in a soft slight smile: nothing any more, but only the woman that he loved, the woman that loved him; and gladder, prouder to be that, than of all fame, or use, or praise, or place on earth.

He went, and his reluctant steps and his hesitating will bore him to what all the manhood in him rebelled against and foreswore; bore him to the lamplight, the laughter, the smoke, and the quarrels of the Turkish chamber.

He felt a coward and untrue, but habit is stronger than conscience; he said to himself, 'To-morrow, not to-night.'

He recoiled from seizing the asp and flinging it from him, yet he submitted under the sense of its tightening folds.

'You do not look ill now,' said his tyrant sharply, standing under the light in yellow shining raiment, with glittering eyes, fierce and curious, and menacing. 'You do not look ill now. What has kept you away? You are coming to the opera?'

'I am not well; but I will come.'

He grew very pale; he seemed to suffer. She bent her jealous eyes on him.

'Are you ill? I believe there is nothing the matter with you, except indolence. We had a splendid day. I have sold the screen; everything is gone up; we can go to stay to-morrow. You do look pale; take some wine; no? Poor Io! You are feverish.'

She brushed the hair off his forehead and leant her hand on it: he shuddered under the touch.

'There is your husband,' he muttered impatiently, and moved away; she stared at him; she thought he must be feverish indeed to be afraid of her lord's presence.

Other men entered to accompany her to the opera.

It was a great night by royal command. The house was brilliant; the soldier-king sat with his hands resting on the hilt of his sword; the opera was 'Comte Ory;' never did Ioris hear the graceful melodies of it ever again without a shudder of hateful recollection.

His mistress looked well; her amber skirts swept his feet, thick gold chains were twisted around her shapely head: she had a great fan of ostrich feathers; she laughed and was gay; he sat in the chair behind her and seldom spoke.

Turning her head to him, she thought that it was true he was not well, he had fever; his face was so flushed, and his eyes had so strange a look.

'May I leave you?' he asked her early in the hateful night. 'May I leave you? You have others with you, and indeed I am ill, at least too ill to bear this music and this glare.'

She pitied him for once; believed; and let him go.

He returned to Etoile, to the cool shadowy flower-filled chamber on the Montecavallo, with

its windows open to the Rospigliosi gardens, to the song of the nightingales, and the shine of the stars.

'Have you told her?' she asked him.

'I could not to-night,' he answered. 'She is gone to the opera. Do not let us talk of her. I want peace. I have been without it so long. Give it me!'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

On the morrow Ioris said to himself, 'I must tell her now.' And his courage quailed even as quailed Launcelot's before the Queen, knowing that 'at a wink the false love leaps to hate.'

And he was not armed even as Launcelot was, with a crown diamond, to pave the way to freedom.

He knew his tyrant well enough to know that liberty she would have sold—at a high price—but he had not such purchase money. All his riches, such as they were, were whirling already in the maelstrom of her speculations or sunk in the sands by the Syrens' sea.

He awoke with a heavy heart, even though his pulse beat high with fresh and unworn joys.

There was a conflict to go through that he dreaded; it had been easier to stand stript to his shirt, with the bare sword in his hand, in the dawn that saw a duel in his student days. Moreover, he scarcely wished to unveil this sweet secresy, this love unguessed of the world, and carry it out into the broad day that had no shadows. He was so weary of publicity, of bondage, of thraldom, that all the world could laugh at as street crowds can jeer a galley-slave working with his gang on public roads; it was delightful to him once more to know a passion that was shut in between his own heart and one other's, like a culled flower between the closed pages of a poem.

When the public voice proclaims it, love has lost half its mystic charm. Never to the lover is the hour of love so fair as when it is stolen from the rest of the covetous day, and the gentle theft is hidden from the world. Troubled and feverish he was; but it is this trouble and this fever that are youth.

For a few days he was ill enough to make it natural that he should let the transit to Fiordelisa be made without him; ill enough to with-

draw himself with the petulance of indisposition from his mistress's presence; well enough to rise as the cool twilight came, and take his way to the quiet chambers of Etoile. Once or twice he was compelled to go to Fiordelisa. He felt a traitor and false: not to the woman who reigned at Fiordelisa, but to Etoile, to whom he did not confess that he went thither; to Etoile, to whom he said, 'She is in the country: do not let us speak of her.'

The position was full of peril, but it was a peril that was sweet; as sweet as it was to Romeo to gaze up into the moonlit balcony, knowing that naked swords might be unsheathed, and waiting for him amongst the white garden lilies.

Etoile did not dream of any peril.

He loved her: it seemed to her as natural as for the day to dawn that he should put from about him the foul bonds of an unlovely and loveless tyranny. The days went by, to her beautiful as a child's fancy of the Hesperides. She never questioned him. She never doubted him. Since he loved her, it seemed to her that all the threads of those coarse and roughly woven meshes,

twisted round his life, must fall asunder and drop away at a touch, like the frail gross things they were. To doubt his power to put them from about him now, would have seemed to her like doubting his honour itself; like doubting the very manhood in him. She asked him nothing because she feared nothing. He was the maker and master of both their fates. 'Since he loves me'—she would think with a smile; and think that all was said, and made sure, in that.

It was one of those errors, simple, yet sublime, which cost far more than many a crime.

Once she said to him with a thrill of pain and of aversion:

'Must she be there in your house all the summer?' And he answered her:

'What matter, love, since I am not there?'

He had come from Fiordelisa that day and had promised to return there; but he meant honestly to go thither no more after that one evening. He said to himself every day, 'To-morrow I will tell the truth,' and every day faded and died with the truth untold. Had Etoile been more mistrustful of him, it might have been

better for him: it would have been less easy to deceive her, less temptation to continue in the perilous path of secrecy. As it was, he closed her eyes and kissed their shut lids, and knew well that they would not open unless he bade them. She lived in her dreams; and her dreams as he had said were his captives.

One day she awoke from her dreams for a moment, and looked at him with eyes whose tenderness seemed to him to hold all heaven in their gaze, and said to him in a low tone, 'Let her stay in the house if you must—your dead mother's house!—but tell her of this, tell her all the truth at once. It is but just to her.'

'I will.' He kissed her as he promised.

She shivered a little as with a sudden chill. 'Tell her, so that I may never see her again near you: it would hurt me; I feel as if it would kill me; now.'

Ioris promised her once again, and meant what he vowed. 'They will meet in the world; they will be friends a few years hence,' he thought; 'or at least any other women would but these.'

His heart misgave him; his task was harder

than he strove to think it. He was used to the banal and brief passions of society; the ties so close one hour, so loose the next; the prudent shallow hatreds that kissed and jested, the fleet emotions that seethed like boiling froth, and evaporated in mere vapour; the poor base trumpery evanescent thing that women of the world call love. These were what he had seen, and what he had known, but a chill passed over him as he felt that it was not with such as those that he had now to deal; that on one side of him was a passion cruel as death, and on the other side a love high as the angels: that of the women who claimed his life now, one was too fierce, the other too frank, for either ever to drift away into the indifference, that is the world's form of forgiveness, ever to look into the other's face and smile because Society was watching.

He left her and drove across the plain in the radiant afternoon colours, warm on the clusters of cistus, and the plains of grass; the April light was lovely about his path, and in the thickets by the ruins and the tombs the thrushes and finches were singing, and the white butter-

flies were afloat like leaves of white roses scattered on the wind.

He drove slowly through all the loveliness and lustre of the fast-declining day; he dreaded the place whither he went, the voice that would there smite on his ear. He was happy with a sweet sense of youth, of triumph, of sympathy, of hope, that had long been a stranger to his breast; but he was ill at ease, and his pulse beat with a dull apprehension.

This woman to whom he was faithless, was not a woman to forgive.

The sun had set when he reached Fiordelisa, but day still lingered golden, yet shadowy. With a strange sense of loathing he threw the reins to his servant, and approached the house by a side path that led by an old arched door into the cortile.

He heard the tinkle of cups, the uproar of laughter, the sounds of the mandoline, and his mistress's voice singing one of the popular songs:

Ad ogni fenestra vo' tendere un lacio
A tradimento per tradir la luna,
A tradimento per tradir le stelle,
A tradimento per tradir il sole,
Perche restai tradito dall' Amore!

Tradito!—his blood ran cold, as if a dagger touched him. What would her vengeance be when she knew herself betrayed, befooled, forsaken? He had felt a bare blade in a duel, and faced a rain of bullets in a battle with as much calmness as other men; he had carried the dead, and watched by the sick, in the great cholera of Rome with tranquil and dauntless devotion; but the bravest man on earth will quail before a woman that he fears.

Ioris as he stood a moment by the old grey door, before unlatching it, felt a sickly sense at once of fear, and of loathing, as the fierce imperious singing thrilled through his nerves. When he should tell her that she must arise and depart, and let another reign there, how would it be?

Through a grating in the door he saw the court; the tea-table, the lounging chairs, the rugs and skins, the hanging creepers; he saw Mr. Challoner dozing, the child playing with a coloured balloon, the servants moving with a tray, Burletta and Serravalle smoking, Douglas Græme making tea, and on a couch that was covered

with a tiger skin, the Lady Joan singing her song of treason, and striking the chords of her mandoline.

With a horrible blankness and suddenness, the full realisation fell on him of how utterly she believed herself to be mistress there until the grave should take her!

With a shock he himself realised how bitter as death, and inexorable as hatred, are those unholy unions which are a blasphemy of marriage and a parody of love, yet are passed off on a world that is willing to be duped,—as friendship.

He opened the door with the reckless gesture of a man who goes straight on a drawn sword: he was sick of his bonds, indifferent to his danger, braced to the conflict, ready for the worst,—the hour of fate and of freedom had struck.

Lady Joan, as the door unclosed, stopped in her song, and loosened her hold of her mandoline. 'Io! How late you are! I have some sad news for you, come here!'

He went reluctant; he stood by her with a look on his face new there; she was not alone,

he could say nothing. The hour had passed: his courage had sunk.

'Grandmother is very ill,' said the Lady Joan. 'I have got to go to England. How you look—!'

'It is sudden,' said Ioris, and his voice shook a little; his heart leapt with a great relief and a great joy; she thought the emotion was sorrow and despair.

'Awfully sudden,' she said, as her hand closed on his, which was cold and unresponsive. 'I had the telegram this afternoon. They fear she cannot live.'

It was true: she had had the telegram, and it had arrived opportunely to give her a reason for that journey which was so inevitable and imperative in the pursuit of her idea.

Burletta, who knew that the real cause of the journey was that the poor pot was going to be mended and painted, sat and smoked with the obese gravity of a fat pasha. 'What a great creature she is!' he thought, 'always a good little lie ready, smooth as an egg, round as an apple."

He did not himself believe any more in the telegram than he had done in the Parmeggianino,

but there he wronged her. She had really had it, favoured by fortune, as fortune always favours the bold.

'Such a sad thing,' said Douglas Græme over the teapot. 'Such a bore, too, just as we were all so tremendously jolly up here. Poor old Lady Archiestoune. Why couldn't she go off before? She must be really quite antediluvian!'

Mr. Challoner, waking from his slumbers, shook his head.

'Ninety years of a most admirable life now going to its long rest!' he said, with a tinge of poetry in his feelings and his tone. 'The train leaves at 7·45, I think. Joan, always impetuous, wished to start to-night, but it is impossible to pack.'

Ioris all the while stood silent.

Lady Joan got out of her tiger-skin couch, and gave her little girl a box on the ear.

'You heartless little thing! How dare you play with that bladder, when poor old great grannie is dying, and you will never be able to see her any more?'

'You were singing, mamma,' murmured the

child. 'You were singing. I did not know ——'

'Come here, my darling; never mind mamma,' said Mr. Challoner, from his rocking-chair.

Lady Joan, with a glance and a gesture that Ioris knew and was in the habit of obeying, flung herself out of the iron gate which led to the old grassy pleasaunce beyond the court, where the peacocks were strutting under the boughs.

'How odd you look, Io!' she muttered, as he followed her. 'What is the matter with you?'

The truth sprang to his lips.

Had it been spoken, all his future would have been freed, and have risen to a brighter and a purer light, as the loosed lark rises to the sun. But the cruel mischances that mock men were at work in that rosy evening air.

As he hesitated, and kept silence, Douglas Græme came through the open gate after them, throwing cake to the peacocks.

'What will all your beasts and your birds do without you, Joan?' he said, in the easy familiarity of their cousinship, seventy-seven times removed.

'Io will be here to take care of them,' said the Lady Joan, tartly, annoyed to be followed when she wished to be alone.

'Do you mean you are going without Io?' cried Douglas Græme, saucily. 'I should have as soon dreamt of your going without—your husband!'

'Don't be impertinent,' said his cousin, more tartly still.

Ioris stood pale and silent under the boughs, and turned and went back to the house.

'You are breaking his heart, you cruel woman,' said Douglas Græme, with a merry laugh.

She smiled, and bade him hold his tongue. She liked to be thought cruel,—and invulnerable.

Dinner was soon after served as the moon rose, and Ioris was not again alone with her. He was excited, and talked and laughed with more animation than was his wont; his eyes occasionally had a brilliant flash of light in them, that Mr. Challoner, who was an observant man, alone saw.

'He is glad we are going,' thought Mr. Chal-

loner, and pitied the man who knew his wife so little as to imagine she would not come back. Mr. Challoner himself intended to come back: he liked the place; he liked the shooting; he liked the model pigstyes; he liked, above all, leaving his wife there, whilst he himself went to the baths.

'Not come back? *pas si bête!*' mused Mr. Challoner, as he ate his olives slowly, and sipped his old lacryma with relish. Memories of some of Ioris's careless signatures floated before his mental vision. There was no knowing; things might be managed. Mortgages are elastic things, but they are given to sudden collapse like other elastic articles. The place would be a nice dower for his own little daughter, and he fancied there was a title that went with the land. So Mr. Challoner dreamed over Ioris's olives and Ioris's lacryma-christi. Mr. Challoner was a poor man indeed, but he was a practical man. Ioris was not practical.

The moon shone through the grated casements in on the old dining-hall, on to the dinner-table with its flowers, sweetmeats, and fruits,

and flashed on the silver dagger that was run through the Lady Joan's braided hair.

Ioris's feverish vivacity had changed into an absorbed silence. He was thinking of another woman whom the moonbeams might soon find there.

Outside the nightingales were singing.

Lady Joan looked at his averted face.

'Poor fellow,' she thought, 'how unhappy he is!'

There is always something pathetic about a person who is utterly and entirely deceived. In her absolute self-deception even Lady Joan became pathetic.

The dinner was long. Mr. Challoner and Burletta both liked their dinners. When at last it was over, Lady Joan caught up her guitar, threw its riband over her shoulders, and sauntered out into the cortile, and thence into the garden once more.

'Come with me, Io!' she called to him.

He hesitated; then obeyed with laggard step.

Douglas Græme this time was too discreet to

follow them. He stayed in the court with Mr. Challoner, and smoked.

It was nine o'clock; the grass was dewy beneath their feet; the crescent moon was sinking. As Ioris joined her outside the gate in the fragrant darkness, she stretched out her hand, and curled her arm about his, and leaned towards him.

She took his stillness and his irresponsiveness for grief and for anger.

'Don't mind it so much,' she said, tenderly. 'I shall come back as soon as ever I can, and I will write every day, and you might meet me in Paris, as you have done before. Io! how pale you are!'

'It is a shock to me to lose you so suddenly,' he muttered, and he wound his arm about her as she leaned against his shoulder.

'I cannot tell her now,' he thought. 'It will be easier to write it, and it will hurt her less.'

So the lie passed, that for evermore he was never to undo and unwind from about his life.

As he stooped his head where they stood together in the twilit garden ways, and kissed

her, he felt disloyal and unfaithful; but it was not the disloyalty to her that smote him—not the unfaithfulness to her that stung him with its sense of shame.

He felt disloyal to the other lips that he had touched that day; he felt unfaithful to the fairer faith that had come to him with the April blossoms like a gift of God.

'*Amor mio!*' murmured his mistress, flinging her arms about his throat in that fierce tenderness with which in her strange way she loved him.

The nightingales were singing in the leaves. He could have strangled them for that jarring tumult of song.

Ioris shuddered under the embrace; but he submitted to it.

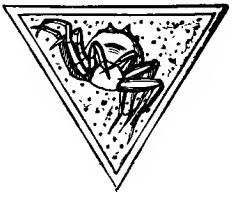
'I cannot tell her the truth to-night,' he thought.

Alas for him! the day was never to dawn that should hear him tell it her.

The lovely deep azure of the sky was above them, with here and there the clusters of the stars; the air was full of the fresh fragrance of

the spring; near them were the glossy dark leaves of an orange tree and the curling tendrils of a purple clematis that covered the old grey wall of the cortile. He never again saw this garden path of his old home, by evening time, in starlight, without a sickly passion of regret.

If he had but put her arms from about his throat, and told her the truth then!



CHAPTER XXXIV.

The summer night waned and passed, and the sunrise came, and a day of hurry, turmoil, nuisance, noise, bustle, business followed it, and with the fall of evening she went from Fiordelisa; and he let her go, still with the truth untold.

'It will be easier written,' he said to himself, with the procrastinating habit of a hesitating and indolent temperament, and stood in the glare and dust and uproar of the railway terminus, seeing the train for the north steam slowly out into the golden haze, past the old broken temples and the ruined aqueducts.

She had gone, believing a falsehood; she had gone, believing him broken-hearted; she had gone, saying to him, 'I shall be back by harvest,' and thinking to herself, 'How he will miss me! What will he do?'

And he let her go wrapped in the happy lie that her own vanity made her accept with so simple a credulity, like the merest peasant maiden that ever lent an ear to the whispers of her own amorous vanity.

He let her go, self-deluded.

As the steam drifted over the distant Campagna and the train vanished in the yellow mists of the hot evening, he drew a deep breath, like a man who casts from his shoulders a burden borne too long.

Then he went to the woman he loved.

The sunset splendours of the falling night were streaming through the glow of roses on the terrace as with glad and impetuous eagerness he entered her presence, and threw himself at her feet.

'Rejoice with me!' he cried, 'she is gone!'

'Gone?'

He laughed aloud in the gaiety and gladness of his release.

'She is gone—yes. I am a slave no more; for your love is an empire and not a bondage.'

The nightingales sung in a palm-tree that a passion-flower clung to and climbed, and their song was beautiful to him.

It is true she was gone, but not gone as those who leave no trace—not gone as those who go for ever. All things spoke of her at Fiordelisa; her clothes hung on the pegs; her guitar was cast on a couch; her cigars filled an old silver ostensoir; her alpenstock and her sun umbrella leaned together in the loggia; her legacy of orders and commands weighed on every dependant and occupied every hour. When Ioris went up there next day, and as his first act of freedom loosened the hound from his chain, he shuddered as the signs of her presence met him everywhere: they were also the menaces of her return.

Imperator gambolled to and fro with mad joy, having no prescience of future captivity that should avenge on him his present raptures.

But his master could not shake off all foreboding.

As the days wore on the electric wires shocked him into unwelcome remembrance of her with messages that he cast impatiently aside, or as impatiently answered; and the post brought him long close pages of amorous words, mingled in odd union with a thousand directions as to vineyards, and brood-mares, and old furniture and new cattle, which he threw away but half read indeed, yet which served to keep ever present to him the tyrant who was absent.

Again and again he took up his pen to write the truth to her, and be free.

But again and again he deferred the ungracious task that was hard to word aright, and forbore to do more than reply that the brood-mare had foaled, or that the rains had hurt the young vines.

He was so content with her away, he dreaded to launch the bolt that might free him for ever indeed, but which might call her back fleet and ferocious, riding the whirlwind of vengeance; who could be sure?

He strove to forget her as utterly as her insistent and continual messages and letters would allow: he dared not risk the recall which he feared the truth, when told, would prove to a woman who, as his knowledge of her told him, would never passively accept dismissal, or forgive infidelity.

To Etoile he said, 'She is in trouble, death is around her, she is not thinking of me. Before she dreams of returning I will tell her—that will be time enough.'

She did not insist; she thought he would always do what honour needed. But when he asked her to go with him to Fiordelisa she would not—a sense of aversion and of delicacy made her shrink from the thought.

'Fiordelisa is very dear to me, because it is yours. But wait,' she said to him. 'Let her memory be exorcised; let all trace of her be gone, then I will come. To me it shall be so sacred; everything shall be as it was in your mother's time. You will tell me what she liked best, and we will have it so—but wait. Let all signs of the woman who has so cruelly profaned it first pass away.'

He loved her for her answer, and was half glad, though half angry, that she would not go there; yet the reply made him ill at ease; she took for granted, as so natural and so simple, that dethronement which he knew could not be compassed without tempest and revolution, perhaps not even without ruin.

When Etoile said to him with a smile, not thinking to hurt him, 'Let your priest asperge it with holy water and strow rosemary, that is the old charm to cleanse places from evil possession—then I will come,' he did not smile in answer. A vague fear, dark, sullen, menacing, as the temper of the woman whom he must brave, weighed on him. Again and again he thought with passionate futile regret, 'Why did I not tell her all that night, when she kissed me, and I loathed her!'

It would have been so quickly told then; one flash of lightning, and the storm would have broken over his head and burst and rolled away.

Now, the storm lowering hung in the distant sky, and overshadowed the brightness of each rising day. Every morning that he rose he

thought to himself, 'If she should come back to-night!' The dread of her was always with him. When Tennyson makes his Guinevere say:

> Our bond is not the bond of man and wife,
> This good is in it, whatsoe'er of ill,
> It can be broken easier—

he wrote of a world far away, in which Guinevere would meekly end in 'holy house at Almesbury,' a sorrowful weak woman, sore troubled with one sin, where modern ladies lightly bear a bushel such, and never feel them. But now that Guinevere needs no sanctuary, finding all she needs in the bosom of a tender and long-suffering society, and repentance and remorse lie with other archaic words embalmed in the dust of dictionaries whence no one takes them out—now, the bonds of Guinevere are the hardest the world forges, and if Launcelot dare to strike for freedom, the world will frown him back to bondage and tell him that in fealty to his traitress his duty lies, and all his honour.

Meanwhile, except for this sudden fear which sometimes started up and seized him, as in a dream of the night a cold hand seems to seize

the sleeper and hold him in a horrid wakefulness, Ioris was happy as since his boyish days he never had been. A woman who loved him perfectly, questioned him never, and could not weary him, because of the frequent surprises and unfathomed depths of a nature which he still but vaguely understood though its strength and its simplicity were alike lovely to him—such a woman awoke all the joys of his youth.

He felt young once more as he hastened through the noon warmth or the evening moonlight to dream his fresh dream as he looked in the eyes of Etoile. It could not last, he knew, this rose glow of sunrise, this golden hush and glory of a love that was like daybreak; it could not last: it must pass into the limbo of dead passions as daybreak passes into the common likeness of all time, filled with the noise and trouble of the world; but whilst it lasted it was so fair; he bade it stay as Faust cried to it before him: being happy.

It was the same with her.

It was enough for her to listen for his step, to hearken for his voice, to remember his touch and

his look when he was gone, to feel the very air grow lighter, the very earth seem lovelier, because he came; she had been but a Muse before, how sweet it was to stoop and become mortal! To love the life that loves you! None can know how deep a delight it is, save those who long have dwelt alone, sufficient to themselves, in the asceticism of the arts and all the cold contemptuous solitude of fame.

When he was absent, she kept his memory with her as Elaine kept the shield at Astolat, embroidering it with every beautiful fancy and with every knightly symbol; when he was there she had but one thought, to give him the peace, the pride, the joy, of life so long denied him.

Being strong, she would not show her strength to him. Being proud, she would not show her pride to him. Having been called by men cold, too scornful, hard to please, it pleased her now to stoop and wait upon his smile and let him see how weak, so far as a great love is weakness, she could be at his behest.

Vain women delight to make their power felt: but Etoile, who was not vain, but who had

laid her strength upon the world, as the driver his whip upon the ass's neck, and knew her strength, and had seen men bend beneath it and before it, Etoile found her joy in stooping lowly in meek obedience.

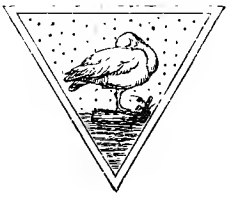
He was not wiser, greater, goodlier than many another no doubt, she had found him in his bondage, and known him in his weakness; he was not lord of himself nor yet of others; but he was what she loved; the only creature that she loved; the only life that was dear to her, and that taught her the mere common joys of earth, and made her know the sweetness of human lips and the light of human eyes; she had dwelt alone and apart, and now she lived for him; she fancied that for this sweet surprise of human mastery no payment of her whole life could be enough.

Out of the deep abundance of her pity love had risen, and she now wondered that she had lived—not knowing love.

It was like a trance that fell upon her: a trance whose visions are of heaven, whilst those who stand by and look on say, this is death.

The conflict that was before her was one that

needed to be fought in mud and mire, with rough weapons, with harsh thrusts, with merciless coarse blows on low and craven foes; but of the conflict she thought nothing; she only was happy,—with her hand in his.



CHAPTER XXXV.

The world had grown quite empty round them; all the idlers and pleasure seekers had flown away; in Rome there were no sounds but of the fall of the fountains and the thrill of the guitars at nightfall.

Lady Cardiff was the last to go.

She came to bid Etoile farewell one day at Rocaldi towards the close of the day; she guessed much, but she enquired nothing, being a woman who knew the world. Only airily and indifferently she said at the close of her visit:

'Do you mean to stay here all the summer? My dear, it will try your health. These grand old gardens harbour death, you know. At least you

will die if you wish to live, and live if you wish to die; people always do: a young mother will die as she gives her child its first kiss, and a hospital for incurables will remain full to its roof! Very odd; the gods *do* jest with us. *Apropos*— I conclude you know old Lady Archiestoune is dead in London? Our dear Joan is gone over: filial piety, you know; some people do say it's the Messina Bridge instead. Anyhow, she is gone. How comfortable Ioris must be, like a boy out of school, I should think. I suppose you see him still sometimes? Now I wonder if he will let her come back? he ought not; it is his one chance of salvation, no one has that sort of chance twice.

> There is a tide, which, taken at the flood,
> Leads on to fortune.

True statement, but most involved metaphor, like most of Shakespeare's. A tide cannot *lead* you anywhere; it may *float* you.'

Lady Cardiff dropped her eyeglass, having seen what she feared in Etoile's changing eyes.

'Come and see my great palms,' said Etoile, and led her out to the gardens where two of the

stateliest palms of Rome towered in the light as they stood perchance in distant days of Horace.

Lady Cardiff lifted her eyeglass to them.

'I don't care for any vegetables,' she said, as she looked. 'I am like Dr. Johnson: I like the street posts and the people that walk past them; still they are fine trees. I can see that. But only look how they are stifled under those passion-flowers; quite an allegory, isn't it; you should write a poem on it. Won't you have the passion-flowers cut down?'

'And my poor nightingales that sing all night in the passion-flowers? oh, no!'

'Passion-flowers and nightingales! Most poetic!' said Lady Cardiff almost crossly. 'But I wish the air were better, my dear; you will excuse me if I am prosaic. A well-trapped drain is the best poetry after all.'

'The air is beautiful,' said Etoile with a smile that made her face at once tender and thoughtful and full of that nameless light, like a flame shining through alabaster, which only a great joy gives.

'Poison!' said Lady Cardiff, sharply.

Then on a sudden impulse she touched Etoile's forehead with her lips.

'God bless you, my love! Cut the passion-flowers down; they will only choke the palms, believe me, only choke them. I wish you were not going to stay here with the nightingales; but you are the best judge of the air that suits you, and you are your own mistress, and I am not an old friend to have the right to scold you. I wish I were. Adieu!'

'What business had he to grow his passion-flowers there?' she thought, with anger to herself, as her carriage rolled out of the ilex shadows of Rocaldi. 'If he will have strength enough, it will all come right; but he will not have strength: he will let that black-browed jade return, and there will be nothing but misery out of it all for the innocent one. It is always so. How loyal she is to him, too—not a word of his name! Dear, dear, what a pity she came! She was so content, and so calm, and so cold, and so wrapped in her dreams and creations, and now—he will have no strength. It is she who will be sacrificed, and she will live and die with a broken

heart on that bare rock of her's, all alone in the middle of the open sea, and our dear Joan will count up her money, and grin to the end of her days—triumphant. Lord, what fools men are! O the pity of it, the pity of it, Iago!'

Then Lady Cardiff went home with the tears in her eyes, and almost could have cried with rage and vexation: so much did she take it to heart that, though the German Embassy had sent her some choicest four-year old Johannisberg, and 'Figaro' had just come in, and there was a telegram to say that Lord Cardiff was punished for his sins with the gout, she could enjoy none of these good things, but sat silent and out of spirits until her servants told her the hour drew nigh for the train to the north.

A watcher less merciful and as keen of sight —one who did not come beneath the ilex shadows of Rocaldi, but nevertheless kept vigil on what passed there—remained down in the city throughout the sultry season; Lady Joan had left her watchdog chained by the Forum Trajano.

In their grim, dusky, dusty corner the three sisters remained to copy canvases and panels,

and be cited as instances of filial love, because they sent their old parents to a lodging by the sea.

'Such dear, good daughters!' said Society, with its last breath, flying itself away, whilst the poor old father, tormented by sun and sand and fleas and gnats, tottering about on the shore with his deaf wife upon his arm, felt that Regan and Goneril might have been better to bear than these Cordelias who kept the purse-strings, and measured the whisky, and scolded from morn to eve, and heaped up their own devoted sacrifices like coals of fire on his head. Lear after all had much to be thankful for, thought Lord George: Lear at any rate was left alone.

The sisters had hoped that the wide empty chambers and the majestic solitudes of Fiordelisa would have been placed at their disposal, in her absence, by their dear friend who loved them with a thousand loves; part of the summer there had been part of their perennial payment, and to stay there in her absence could have been no impropriety with their mother's knitting-needles

and their father's crutch in the antechamber. But their dear friend had gone, kissing them all indeed, but making otherwise no sign. Lady Joan did not choose to have even so harmless and faithful a creature as her Cerberus installed ever so temporarily in her throne—and Ioris said nothing. Ioris did not even ask them up for a day. So their hopes fell fruitless, as they had seen so many hopes fall, knowing well what hell it is in waiting to abide, dancing attendance on the whims and wills, caprices and commands, of other people; and they stayed down in their close, pent-up old palace amidst the evil smells of the city with no other consolation than that they would have time to finish copying frescoes of Domenichino ordered by Lord Hebrides out of good nature and clannish feeling, and that they could perhaps be still more sure of what he, whom it was their task to watch, should do in absence of the one who claimed his life.

The task was difficult, though they deemed it easy. Ioris, knowing he was watched, turned restive and put out his wit to baffle them. They were no match for him in that social diplomacy

when he chose to exercise his skill. He was as courteous, as cordial, as compassionate as ever with these poor toiling women whom he really pitied; but when they tried to spy on him, he baffled them.

He met their questions with serene indifference; he parried their curiosity with calm evasions.

'It is what they deserve, if they persecute me,' he said to himself; and he beat them with their own weapons.

What affair was it of theirs?

Once or twice he went and watched Marjory at work in Sta. Maria degli Angeli on her Domenichino, and gave her counsel with the delicate and unerring taste in art which characterised him. Sometimes he sat with them in their own dull, dreary chamber; when he did so it was with intent to blind them.

'Etoile? I really can tell you but little. She is shut up in her villa, absorbed on some great work for next season's Salon,' he would answer them, and say it so indifferently and naturally, that it almost deceived them. Almost,

not quite, for Marjory, whose soul was sick with haunting dread, would now and then get a hired carriage to take her out of the gates along the dusty highroads and the yellow grass to where the ilex thickets of Rocaldi hung in the ruby glow of sunset light, a green oasis in the burnt-up desert, and went about under the walls till twilight fell, and once, twice, thrice she saw a form she knew, and heard the ring of a horse's hoof, and Ioris passed her, not noticing a woman's figure low bent in the meadows, as though gathering herbs.

Then Marjory went home, pressing the jagged iron of hungry jealousy in her breast, and wrote a letter to her bosom friend away in England, and added in a postscript, as though carelessly, 'Io is quite well, I believe. We really see nothing of him now you are away. They say he spends all his time at Etoile's villa—the archæological picture, I suppose! *Au revoir*, dearest!'

Lady Joan got the letter when she was sitting alone in the little house in Mayfair.

Her grandmother was dead, which was odious, because she could not go to Prince's, and show

off her skating, which was admirable, nor go anywhere else that was amusing, and was bored to death with her uncles and aunts and relatives generally, and grew quite pale with having to do propriety so long unrelieved by any touch of colour or diversion. She had sold two painted coffers she had lent to a loan collection, and she had sent some lace and uncut garnets to a Stafford House charity, and she had gone to a Westminster Service with the head of the Opposition, and she had visited the Royal Academy with Tom Tonans and his wife, and had altogether been so steeped in the Jordan of Respectability that she felt, as soon as she could get out of her mourning, she might dance the Carmagnole with perfect impunity wheresoever she liked. Still Jordan had bored her. It bores most people. And though this bi-annual dipping in it was deemed necessary by Mr. Challoner, she felt that never—no, never again—could she go through it; she had always felt so whenever she had bathed; yet she had always returned to dip afresh, being a woman in whom after all prudence was stronger than preferences.

Now, as she sat in her bedroom she read the postscript to her watchdog's warning. She had had a letter by the same post from Ioris; she had read it first of all; she now seized it and read it again. Re-perused by the lurid light of that postscript's suggestions, the letter seemed to her no lover's effusion—seemed cold, brief, unsatisfactory. It told her that the mare had foaled and that the vines were healthy: hardly anything else. The *devoto ed affettuoso, Ireneo*, of the signature seemed to her at the end to be scrawled off, as if the writer were glad to be rid of an unwelcome task. A million suspicions darted out like little stings from between the lines and seemed to hiss at her.

All day long and every day as she bathed in Jordan, as she went in her crape to hear the will read, uninterested because there was hardly anything to leave, and what there was went to her father and aunts; as she smothered her yawns while the head of the Opposition discussed a crabbed and vexed passage of Dante with her; as she toiled through the Academy, where nothing interested her, because she only liked the old

masters, the dear old masters, who could be bought in a garret and sold at a profit; as she travailed over documents, reports, and accounts, to persuade recalcitrant shareholders, and fascinate unwilling presidents, and effect herculean transfers, all day long — in everything she did there was always one wasp's sting always festering in her—the fear of what might be doing in Rome.

Call him she dared not.

She had just brought her transfer to boiling point. She had just mended and painted her broken jar. She had just managed so beautifully, that all the sheep that were silly as swine would go over the steep all alone, and the shepherds be safe with their fleeces. If he came, all would be ruined: he was such a fool. Over the steep he would go himself; he would break the mended pot, he would throw the soup away as it boiled. He would even sell Fiordelisa. Yet every hour of the day, smiling on dowagers, listening to deans, and talking of Dante, every day plunging at morn into finance, and washing in Jordan at even, every hour the terror thrilled through her—if he should be with Etoile!

She did not much fear it, because to be blind with a supreme vanity is like being shut in a windowless room lined with looking-glasses. Yet the vague dread was there. At the bark of her watch-dog it sprang up full armed.

She was alone in her bedroom that looked over the smoke-blackened roofs of Mayfair, with sooty sparrows twittering on the sill. With a pang of passionate longing she thought of her bedroom at Fiordelisa, the roses clinging round it, the sweet azure sky beyond it, the old sculptured shields above it, a thrush singing on an orange bough, and the voice of her lover calling from the old grey court *Mia cara, che fai tu?* She was not a tender-natured woman, nor one to be touched by sudden memories, but at that moment the hot fierce tears rushed to her eyes and throat. At that moment, for once, she loved with love, and not with self-love; she felt that all the world and its small gains, and its shallow hypocrisies, would be well lost to lean upon his breast, to look into his eyes.

'If she dare take him from me!' she said in her teeth, and a bitterer oath than men can

swear was smothered in the heat and harshness of her soul.

Take him from her!——

Weak women would have fled to Rome, leaving the soup boiling over, the pot unglazed, the sheep unsheared; but she was strong.

She washed the scorching tears from her eyes, she swallowed the choking fury in her throat, she put on her crape gown and went downstairs to where her lord perused the newspapers, and her aunts sat penning letters of thanks for condolence in bereavement.

'I have heard from Io,' she said frankly, with that frankness which never deserted her even on the shores of Jordan and in the house in Mayfair. 'I have heard from Io; he wants to come over; do you think we could get the transfer signed this week? I should like to give him a pleasant surprise if he *do* come.'

Mr. Challoner laid down the newspaper and considered gravely:

'I think we could,' he said, after a pause. 'I will go down to Cannon Street and see if I can hurry them on: is he really coming? Well the

change might do him good; he is not very strong.'

For Mr. Challoner also could read between the lines, and wanted himself very much to get free to go to Germany for those waters which were so vitally necessary for his little daughter's health, and also he was fully alive to the fact that his wife's maiden aunts, stately gentlewomen of old-fashioned notions, were within hearing at their writing-table. Therefore he spoke with that cordial good humour and good understanding which he always put on when they were washing in Jordan.

'I will go with you,' said his wife, and turned to her aunts. 'You will excuse me, won't you, dear aunties? It is a business affair in which Robert and I are very interested for sake of some friends, a sad speculation of poor Io's that I am afraid will not turn out very well, even with the very best that we can do.'

'Of course we have nothing to do with the affairs of the Prince Ioris, nothing,' explained Mr. Challoner to the ladies at the writing-table, as he was in the habit of explaining it to Society.

'Nothing at all, poor fellow; but there has been a good deal of English capital put into this affair in Sicily, and so it seems one's duty, really one's duty——'

And Mr. Challoner took out his handkerchief and polished his eyeglasses, not ending his sentence, knowing all the virtue that lies in the vague.

'I don't really know how Ioris stands,' continued Mr. Challoner with an air of protest. 'One is always so delicate on these matters with friends; but I am afraid his good nature has been abused, his imagination run away with—— co-directors? Yes, we are co-directors, it is true, but he has assumed personal responsibilities that I never would have done; against my advice; quite against my advice.'

Mr. Challoner sighed and gazed into vacancy.

'Is he so fond of speculation, then?' said one of the ladies at the writing-table.

'It is his patriotism,' said Mr. Challoner; in the Temple of the Virtues every motive was always labelled with the very highest title procurable in nomenclature.

'Oh!' said the gentlewomen together. They had lived in London and Paris all their lives and had, before this, heard patriotism used as a reason for a variety of things, from a minister's keeping in office against the will of the country, to a newspaper's writing a country into blood-shed and bankruptcy: they were quite aware of the word's elasticity.

'It is Io's patriotism,' echoed the Lady Joan. 'If he thought he would do the country any good by it, he would jump down into a pit and let it swallow him like Curtius. It is very fine, you know, all that; but it does not pay. I always tell him he will get no recompense, and end in the poor-house. My dear Robert, get a hansom cab, quick!'

Then she put on her crape veil, and drove with her husband to the City to hurry agents and secretaries, and get her mended pot baked in the muffle of European exchanges, and drawn out as new pottery by those modern masters of destiny —the brokers.

'She seems to think of nothing but business,' said one of the gentlewomen left at the writing-table.

Guinevere might in her jealousy throw the diamonds in the moat. Lady Joan knew better.

Business was dear to her, dear were all its pastimes and its profits; she mewed herself in close misty dens of offices through the sweet summer days and condemned herself to the dusty, dreary, noisy streets of London, when the roses were all in bloom at Fiordelisa, that she might keep her mended pot sailing bravely and unbroken down the stream of speculation with the iron pots of safer and richer enterprise. To discern *hausse* and *baisse*, to watch the rise and fall of gold, to correct the proofs of a prospectus and see a knot of shareholders smile, to captivate brokers and commission agents, and to be up to her eyes in telegrams and despatches—this was as the very breath of life to her, even in the misty, murky, sultry atmosphere of the City in midsummer. But chiefly was it so sweet to her because business forged the fetters that a tired love could not break. Business wove the shroud in which a dead love could be imprisoned in its grave, her own and no one else's, even though dead, dead, dead!

The shrewd hard sense that underlay her amorous vanity told her that passion soon or late calls to deaf ears; pipes, and none dance; lifts its lips and meets no kiss; but that the woman who has interwoven herself with a man's fortunes, and bound his hands to hers with the hempen ropes of commonplace, every-day cares and troubles, has entered the very fibre of his life as the lichen enters the bark of the tree.

The lichen may kill the tree ere its time, but what of that? They are together till the end comes and the axe hews down both together.

So she crushed the rage, and the fear, and the longing, all into her heart in silence, and drove down beside her lord to the City. For one short savage instant the Cleopatra had leapt up in her to o'erleap sea and mountains, and reach Rome at a bound.

But the *dame du comptoir* was still stronger than the Cleopatra, and she went and worked in the City; then sent a telegram—instead.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHILST in her hot heavy mourning garb, in the sooty air and the gaslit little den of her agent's office, sitting with brokers and lawyers, she spun her threads about her distant lover as the spider spins in the dark to catch the firefly that makes love in the starlight, Etoile, in her cool white garments, was walking amidst the blue lilies that filled the grass under her ilex groves. The chimes of a church were sounding near; the bells of goats cropping the honeysuckle in the field beyond, rang in unison softly; the acacias were full of blossoms and of bees; the strong voluptuous heat lay on the land like sleep on the eyes of a tired dreamer.

She walked on, her white gown trailing on the flowering grasses; she gathered a lily, and put it in her breast; she held a fan of green palm leaves between her and the setting sun; a ripe fruit tumbled and rolled before her feet; light and silence were about her.

'How good is God,' she thought. 'How beautiful is life!'

His shadow fell through the sunshine, his step came through the flowers, his eyes smiled down into hers, and his lips touched her.

'Dreaming always!' he murmured.

'Dreaming of you! Are you jealous of that?'

'No; since your dreams are my prisoners.'

He wound his arm about her; he moved the sultry air with her fan of palms. They strayed through the flowering grasses together—their path was sweet with crushed herbs and dropped roses.

'You are happy?' they asked one another.

'I am happy!' each answered the other.

She said the whole truth with no latent thought to mar it when she said that she was

happy. When he said the same words, a dark and restless care was tugging at his heartstrings, which, though he often forced it away, yet seldom wholly left him.

Ruin seemed near him, and vengeance nearer still. When in the sultry noons he wearily pored over the papers and accounts of the many enterprises and speculations into which friendship had allured him, he only succeeded in making his eyes and his heart ache; when the electric wires shocked his nerves with unwelcome reminder that though his friend was absent in the flesh, in spirit she still stood at his elbow, he wearily cursed the inventive genius of his generation, and felt a breathless impatience and oppression, such as the magician felt who had forgot the spell by which alone the shadows he had summoned could be bidden to dissolve and vanish.

'She would never come back—all would be well;' so he said to himself, being of a nature that was sanguine even whilst apprehensive.

He trusted in some vague way to some kind star that would control her course, and turn it far from his.

Meantime he did nothing: he was happy, and the peril was distant; and he ceased to go to Fiordelisa. Her memories were too present there, like the scent of sandal wood that is stronger than the scent of roses, and cannot be driven out, do what you will; and the memories stifled him, and he hated them. They were only deodorised when the hand of Etoile lay in his.

The old hereditary love of his father's home was always in him, but the place was poisoned to him: when he looked at its threshing-floors, its levelled lawns, its freshly-cleared and naked gardens, its hotbeds and plantations and stock yards, the price which all these things had cost seemed written on them in ruinous figures; and through the solitude, when the throb of the English farm-engines ceased for a moment, he still seemed to hear the voice of his tyrant crying out, 'Io, Io!' as the voice of the horse-leech cries 'Give, give!'

It used to be so beautiful, so shadowy, so still before she came, he thought, and felt that his people had been right when they had wanted to take their axes and hew in pieces the machines

that she had brought, yelling and vomiting fire and black smoke into the sweet, serene, classic woodland silence of that fair hillside.

The noisy, fussy, screaming engine, blackening the blue sky and searing the flowery grass, seemed her meet emblem.

He sighed and left the place, and went to where a woman clad in white was painting in a fragrant solitary place, with the blue passion-flower curling about the casements.

'Teach me to forget all in my life save yourself,' he murmured.

And Etoile listened to his prayer and let him steep himself in welcome oblivion, when, to be wise, she should have harried and lashed him with remembrance till he should have risen and stood free.

But then she loved him.

Women who in their warmest passions love but themselves cannot understand this utter obedience to an unwise will, this tender submission to an unreasoning weakness, this absolute self-negation.

Yet nothing less is love.

Meanwhile this great submission given him intoxicated him like new wine: he thought himself, as he jestingly said, the magician that had called the solitary star down from heaven to earth, and made it his.

'Whilst you shone aloof, and aloft, above this world, all the while you were waiting for me!' he said, with a smile, that she did not see was too victorious.

Had she been a lowlier woman, perhaps he would not have been so careless of her peace through being so proud of her glory. As it was, he, so long a slave, was never tired of feeling himself a king in a vaster and nobler dominion than any he had ever known.

This woman would have stood haughty and indifferent before a howling world, unblenching and serene. He knew that he, alone, could make her grow pale as a chidden child, grow flushed as a sun-kissed rose.

'The world will forget you, hidden here,' he said one day.

Etoile smiled.

'Let it forget me. What matter?'

'No, you must not let it forget you. I love that ring of light about your head that men call fame; it becomes you.'

'The ring of light makes the eyes ache sometimes and sometimes makes the path under one's feet dark enough,' she answered him, and thought with a little pang, 'Is it less myself he loves than that halo about my name?'

For it is possible to be the rival of oneself; and a vague apprehension touched her.

'Do you know,' she said, dreamily, 'sometimes the ring of light seems to me like that chain of fireflies that cruel Mexican women wear at their balls and feasts—for every point of light a little life dies in pain; so, in such notoriety as we who are famous get, with each glitter some little sweetness of peace, or joy, or obscurity, perishes. Our light is made of dying things.'

'That is pretty but foolish, my dear,' he answered her. 'Fame is like wealth or rank or power; it gilds and burnishes the dulness of life. Perhaps I never should have looked at you had you been only a mere woman—not Etoile!'

He meant nothing, yet the words stung her.

They seemed to her to say that his joy over and in her was rather triumph than tenderness—rather the pursuit of pride than of love. Her heart ached with a sudden longing to be the lowliest creature that lived, but only loved by him for herself, and not for the uncertain fitful light that the world's rays shed on her.

'Whenever,' had wise Voightel once said to her, 'whenever (if ever) you do love, you will be for a few months the most happy, and for ever after the saddest of women.' The first part of the prophecy had come to pass, and she had proved its sweet truth; now and then, she thought of the latter half with a chill vague apprehension.

Not that she had any sense of the real perils that lay for her in the worn-out passion of another woman, which was cast behind her, she thought, like a crushed, killed snake.

Whilst she dreamed thus amidst the passion-flowers opening their purple hearts to the sun, she was too happy and too unwise to measure or even perceive the coarse and common perils that environed her, or to know the danger that lay

for her in an absent enemy who seemed to her too low to merit any kind of fear.

She had found Ioris an unwilling bondsman; whilst yet a stranger he had let her see his galled weariness of the net that held him; now that he loved her, it no more would have seemed possible for him to desert her for his tyrant's service than it would have seemed possible for a nightingale, freed of the trap, to re-enter it by choice instead of singing his song of rejoicing in the moonlight, fluttering free wings. She never thought of his absent mistress as any peril to himself or her. He was his own master, he was free; he loved her, he had shaken off him an unworthy and galling servitude; it never passed across her fancy that Lady Joan was still a danger for them both.

She knew that he wrote to England, but this he naturally accounted for by his own entangled affairs. 'They can ruin me,' he said, under his breath, and would not tell her more clearly, save that they had his signatures to many obligations, and had drawn him into many embarrassments that could not be lightly disentangled nor cleared away.

He never told the truth of his affairs to Etoile, because he thought her too visionary to care for or to comprehend the entanglements of finance; partly also because he was always in his own heart ashamed of having been caught in those entanglements, and was conscious that for the descendant of a line of warrior-nobles, and of knightly princes, the questionable honour of the bourse, and of its legalised gambling, was not wise or dignified, or even clean of conscience enough to be fitting.

'Make me what you think me,' he had said to her; and whilst with her he was all she thought him. Away from her, the lower aims and the coarser efforts in which his late years had been steeped by one evil influence might resume their sway, but in her presence the impressionable temper of Ioris made him truly rise to the heights on which he could meet and unite with hers.

Once she had said to him, 'If they can ruin you, as you say, cut through all these nets of speculation, these gordian knots of obligation; cut through them all, let it cost what it may,

and come out from them with your honour safe and free, if it leave you poor.'

He was tempted to follow her counsel; he was tempted to cast Fiordelisa and his last remnants of fortune into the hands of the harpies of finance, and rescue by such loss at least his manhood and his liberty.

But his temper was too hesitating for so irrevocable and headlong a plunge into the unknown. He temporised; he hoped; he waited; he trusted; he dallied with danger, believing that thus he exorcised it.

'You do not understand, my angel,' he would say to her, and close her lips to silence with his kisses when she would have urged him to say more. He told her little, because these things beside her seemed to him so poor, and gross, and mean; he felt also that he had been in a large measure the dupe of circumstances that he should never have allowed to gather round him, and he did not care for the one living creature who saw in him all that the ideal of his youth had once dreamed of becoming, to be roused from her faith and her dreams to hear the

common sorry story of fortunes embarrassed by unwise enterprise and by foolish credulities.

He could not bear to lower himself in her eyes. If he had understood her more truly, he would have known that nothing would have turned her from him; that she would have forgiven him any crime, even what is harder to forgive than crime—any folly, or even any faithlessness. But he did not understand aright; and so he erred and went on in silence.

And all the while through the hot summer, written words, or words brought by the electric wires, startled him from his dreams, and stung him as mosquitoes sting, the sting making him rise hot, irritable, and wearily awakened.

She who was absent, knew how to send such words; blows to rivet loosened bolts, baits to allure vague ambitions, threats to alarm apprehensive honour, thorns to pierce and inflame careless indolence; words that, like the pale, invisible hosts of the mosquitoes, gave no rest.

Over and over again he was on the point of severing for ever the ropes that held the barque of his fate to the quicksands of speculation. But

ere ever the resolve could become accomplished fact, his tyrant, ever with him even in absence, cried, 'Hold!' and he paused, and doubted, and waited, as he waited to tell her the truth, until for ever it became too late.

Etoile knew but little of such things; what poet or artist does? and she knew his love of his own old place, and dreaded to urge on him any haste in action which might imperil it.

'Even if they ruin you I have enough,' she said once: he kissed her, but said, 'My angel, that would not do; I could not live upon a woman; let me free Fiordelisa, in my own way.'

Meantime, her art seemed but little to her now.

She sketched his features again and again, modelled them in clay, and never tired of that; but those long, glad, pure days of absolute absorption in her work, when she had used to have no regret but to see the light fade as the sun set, those were over for ever.

Although her physicians had ordered her to rest for a year, she did not now obey them; with his words came the desire to do something more

beautiful for him than she had ever done for Art alone, something with which his fancy and his features should mingle, and his very being be embalmed. With the true artist, Love finds an involuntary utterance in Art, as the passion of the bird finds utterance in its song.

In her villa there was a large chamber with tapestried walls, jutting out into the garden, with all the rank riot of lush grass and wild flowers round about it; here she made her studio, and here, when he was not with her, she passed all her hours, like Raffaelle, seeing but one face, paint what she would, in that absolute constancy and absorption of every thought, of every breath, of every fancy throughout absence, which is the true fidelity of a life. Did he ever realise all that this gave him, all that this meant, then and hereafter? scarcely: with him love was a thing half of the sentiment, half of the senses, and he smiled sometimes to see it become to her holy as religion, deep-rooted as the hope of immortality.

'Who should ever love you, as you love?' he thought; and then he kissed her, and what need was there of any subtleties of thought or word?

Passion imperious, exacting, cruel, domineering, had long preyed upon his life, but passion tender, obedient, intense, and full of that humility to which a great love bends down the strongest, was strange to him. There were times when he half-feared it as in the old days of visions men half-feared the angels that came to them in the night.

That first fancy of her, as half a Muse and half a saint, was with him still, and though he had made the Muse see no face but his own, and the saint droop to a love all of earth, and was glad and triumphant, yet with a man's inconsistency he was tempted to regret that he had not passed by, and left them as they were; 'some day she will reproach me,' he said to himself.

Perhaps some such vague dissatisfaction with himself moved Pygmalion, and some wish that he had left the marble marble came to him when for him alone the statue bent and blushed.

To Etoile, who knew herself well to be neither Muse nor saint, but only a woman to whom mere human joys had long been strangers, the happiness that he had brought her seemed

worth the loss of life itself; love to the looker on may be blind, unwise, unworthily bestowed, a waste, a sacrifice, a crime, yet none the less is love, alone, the one thing that, come weal or woe, is worth the loss of every other thing; the one supreme and perfect gift of earth, in which all common things of daily life become transfigured and divine, and perhaps of all the many woes that priesthoods have wrought upon humanity, none have been greater than this false teaching, that love can ever be a sin. To the sorrow and the harm of the world, the world's religions have all striven to make men and women shun and deny their one angel as a peril or a shame; but religions cannot strive against nature, and when the lovers see each other's heaven in each other's eyes, they know the supreme truth that one short day together is worth a lifetime's glory.

Etoile walking through the blue lilies of the grass in the warm air, listening for his step, looked back at her past that had not known this joy with wonder and with pity. 'I thought I saw so clearly and so far in those old years,' she thought, 'and yet I never saw all that I missed.'

'Nay dear,' said Ioris with a smile when once she said this to him, 'to give that insight the magician must come.'

And he was glad and proud that he was that magician, and she let him see the power of his wand too much.

'Since it pleases him to know his power, what matter?' she thought. 'I have been strong against the world; strong in my art and in my labours, strong to keep my armour bright in the contest with men: the world has called me too strong; I have earned the right to be weak.'

He had been a slave so long; it pleased her to crown him a king.

Even when he was tyrannous, capricious, or unjust, as a man in his love will often be, she bent her head to the yoke, and was silent and patient as Griseldis. 'He has suffered so much,' she thought. 'There is much to efface for him, so much to be made up to him.' So she set herself to atone to him for the cruelty of another, as though it had been her own.

When a word that might have seemed to him too vain, or too arrogant, sprang to her lips, she

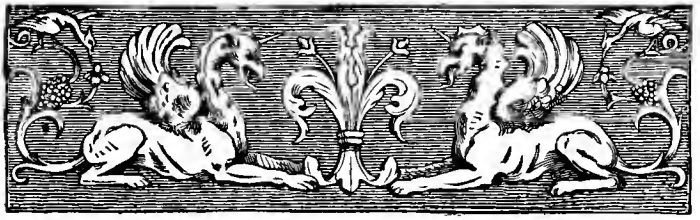
repressed it unspoken, lest it should seem to bear any likeness of his tyrant in it. She wanted to give him back all the pride, the self-esteem, the dignity of thought, of which his mistress had so long robbed him: to strengthen his hands she effaced herself.

She had been proud all her life. She gave him her pride, now, as she would have given him the kingdoms of earth had she had them.

There is a story in an old poet's forgotten writings of a woman who was queen when the world was young, and reigned over many lands, and loved a captive, and set him free, and thinking to hurt him less by seeming lowly, came down from her throne and laid her sceptre in the dust, and passed amongst the common maidens that drew water at the well, or begged at the city gate, and seemed as one of them, giving him all and keeping nought herself: 'so will he love me more,' she thought; but he, crowned king, thought only of the sceptre and the throne, and having those, looked not amongst the women at the gate, and knew her not, because what he had loved had been a queen. Thus she, self-discrowned, lost

both her lover and her kingdom ; and a wise man amongst the throngs said to her, 'Nay, you should have kept aloof upon your golden seat, and made him feel your power to deal life or death, and fretted him long, and long kept him in durance and in doubt, you, meanwhile, far above. For men are light creatures as the moths are.'

But Etoile had never read this story then, nor, had she seen it, would she have read the parable.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

One summer day tidings came whose pain touched her even in her paradise—the tidings that gentle, gracious, courtly Lord Archie had been drowned during a sudden storm, in which his pleasure schooner had gone down, beating off the Isle of Jura, where he had been shooting on the moor.

'Dead!' said Etoile, with white lips: death seemed so impossible for that charming idler, that gentle wit, that graceful saunterer through the smooth and sunny ways of a philosophic life.

'Dead!' said Ioris; and his eyes clouded and his brows grew dark, for he foresaw a darker shadow cast by this death across his own path.

Lord Archie had been the sole fragile tie that had bound his daughter to any kind of truth or reason; before her father, falsehood had always halted on her lips. Calm and indifferent though his habits were, his heart was loyal and his temper true. Ioris had always felt that the dead man had held his tigress in a manner in leash; and now on his table in the offices in the Trastevere there was lying a passionate summons to him in cypher, flashed in lightning from his tyrant, crying to him from across the mountains and the sea:

'Come to me —— come!'

That day their solitude seemed less sweet; even the sunshine of the radiant painting chamber seemed to grow dull; clouds heaved up from the south and the east; a sullen sirocco was blowing, and the golden hearts and blue eyes of the passion-flowers filled with sand, the tears of the desert.

'I cannot write to her?' said Etoile, and hesitated, and looked in his face.

'No,' said Ioris, abruptly, and was silent.

She wound her hand in his.

'Would you let me write to her?—it seems

heartless not to write, and I might tell her the truth of us, in some way, not to hurt her.'

'No!' said Ioris. 'No; I forbid you ——.'

Her head drooped. She did not urge him; she did not chafe against the tyranny of the words, because she fancied that such tyranny was sweet to him after long servitude.

Those who know themselves strong can bear to be submissive. She was strong with the world; she was only weak with him.

He drew her arms about his throat:

'*Ma femme ne peut pas écrire à ma maîtresse*,' he murmured in the language which they most often spoke.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

One morning Etoile was in her painting room. It was about three o'clock, and fresh rains had cooled the air. In the fields beyond her gardens the people were at vintage; their merry cries came to her mellowed by distance, with the laughter of the children and the heavy roll of the grape waggons creaking down the vine alleys.

She had been working two hours. He was away in the city. Her painting had come forth from the canvas into life—it was a scene from the life of Sordello.

And in the face of Sordello she had given the face of Ioris; and the work was delightful to her —not now, as of old, for Art's sake, but for his.

She had left off working for a moment and thrown herself in a low couch; the sea breeze came in through the passion-flowers and stirred the folds of her white linen dress and lifted the hair from her forehead; the swallows were flying before the open casements.

'The summer will soon be going, so soon this summer will be a thing of the past,' she thought; and the thought smote her with a sudden pang in the light, the fragrance, the stillness that were round her.

This one beloved sweet summer!

Shine the sun as it would, and bring forth its flowers and its joys as it might, no summer ever could be quite like this one, which was fading. The vine-dressers beyond the trees were dancing and shouting with gladness because the grapes were ripe and the summer dying; but each reddened leaf to her was a regret, each purpled cluster to her was like a lament: the summer so soon would be dead.

The summer that had had no precursor, that could have no successor, like itself.

The door of the studio opened suddenly;

Ioris entered in silence, and quickly crossed the marble floor and threw himself beside her. He looked worn and very pale; he knelt at her feet and covered her hands with kisses.

'My love, I must leave you!' he murmured. 'I have to go to Paris; I shall be absent only a little while, but—but——'

Etoile thrust him backward with a sudden movement, in which all the blood, and life, and heart, and soul, that were in her, seemed to leap in flame to her cheek.

'You are going—to her!'

'As I live I am not!' cried Ioris; and he rose, too, in as passionate a scorn as her own. 'What! you insult me by thinking I would insult *you,* and follow that woman. No, I go to Paris on a matter that concerns my honour, that is all, to try and save something for all those who trusted me in this accursed Sicilian folly. As for her, she is in Scotland—how can you doubt me so!'

She caught his hands convulsively; she grew as white as death.

'You will not go to her—you will not?'

'By my dead mother's memory if you wish I will swear to you—No! By the heaven above us, No—ten thousand times.'

She sank down in a passion of weeping, and piteously clung to him, whilst all the sweet glow of sunshine went round before her blinded eyes in rings of fire.

'Oh, my love, my life, why leave me? Have I failed in anything? Am I in fault? Are you not happy?——'

He kissed her eyelids, and raised her in his arms.

'We are too happy!—the gods always grudge it. Do you think I would leave you for a little thing? I must go for my honour. I must go to save those who trusted me; there is no other way. Listen, try and be calm; I shall be back before our passion-flowers change colour.'

Then his voice faltered, and a quick sob caught his breath; as he held her to his heart she felt the hot tears fall from his eyes upon her.

Nor was he lying then. He spoke the truth as he meant it, as he saw it. It changed later on in his hands as a gem that no man can control

changes colour. He had resisted the passionate prayers of the absent woman who besought him; he had let her entreaties beat themselves vainly on his deadness and deafness, like fretting waves on the beaten sand; he had been irresponsive, and cold, and unmoved, as only a dead passion that is buried in the charnel house of disgust ever can be. But though the truth was still untold to her far away in the North, his Guinevere had felt the chill, sickly shudder that runs through the hot leaping blood of the woman who is jealous—and forsaken.

She had woven, she had spun, in the dust and the darkness of the great city; she had pulled the threads; she had woven like Fate.

He would not know whither he came, but he would come. So she said to herself. She wove like Fate.

The irises of May had been in bloom when his tyrant had left him free.

The white dahlias and asters of September were in bloom when he broke the spell of a joy too great to last, and went northward.

The memories of those sweet, shining, sultry

months lay like sleeping children in the heart of Etoile, and until thought itself should perish in her, they could never die.

It is so much to have been once entirely happy; never can it altogether pass away.

Yet when he went, it seemed to him that she died; the latter half of the old wise man's prophecy began to realise itself as a cruel spell works slowly out on a doomed thing.

She had utter faith in him.

As he had sworn, so she was sure it was; she never wronged him by the baseness of any disbelief. To doubt him would have seemed to her the foulest insult.

When she touched the colours and the brushes, with which, all her life before, she had been able to summon spirits and angels at her will, and forget the world around her, it was now only to endeavour to perfect his portrait, or call the soft darkness of his eyes up on some blank piece of panel or of canvas. Then she would drop her brush wearily, and lean her head on her hands, and weep bitterly: bereft of him she was twice bereaved, for with him also had gone her art.

Ioris entered in silence, and quickly crossed the marble floor and threw himself beside her. He looked worn and very pale; he knelt at her feet and covered her hands with kisses.

'My love, I must leave you!' he murmured. 'I have to go to Paris; I shall be absent only a little while, but—but——'

Etoile thrust him backward with a sudden movement, in which all the blood, and life, and heart, and soul, that were in her, seemed to leap in flame to her cheek.

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'We are too happy!—the gods always grudge it. Do you think I would leave you for a little thing? I must go for my honour. I must go to save those who trusted me; there is no other way. Listen, try and be calm; I shall be back before our passion-flowers change colour.'

Then his voice faltered, and a quick sob caught his breath; as he held her to his heart she felt the hot tears fall from his eyes upon her.

Nor was he lying then. He spoke the truth as he meant it, as he saw it. It changed later on in his hands as a gem that no man can control

A vague fear, too, lay for ever on her, like a stone on a living blossom.

She would not wrong him with any doubt of his fidelity ; yet he told her nothing; she could not tell what toils were not entangling, what dangers not encompassing, him.

He had gone to save his honour: if his honour made shipwreck?

More than once she was sorely tempted to go also to Paris. It was her home; she had a full and natural right to return there; all her interests, indeed, were suffering from her long absence. Yet she did not go; she feared that it might seem to him as if she followed him, suspected him, spied upon him, importuned him. He had had too much of that weary insult. She would not wrong him so; therefore she stayed.

The days and the weeks of that time were ever afterwards to Etoile, looking back on them, but a dull blank, a chaos of pain, such as the time of a great sickness seems in memory to the sick man looking back to it.

She was herself ill in body — so ill that

physicians grew grave as they looked at her and murmured of the Roman fever, and felt that there was some mental ill beside of which they knew not.

She grew thinner, paler, weaker every day; every night wept more on her sleepless pillows; and the last of the grape harvest was gathered; and the last of the peoples' songs sung; and the winds grew chill as they swept over bare fields, and the last of the passion-flowers faded and fell.

One day a nightingale lay dead at the foot of the palms; a stray shot had stilled its song for ever.

A great hopelessness had fallen upon her.

All her life long she had been brave, sanguine, and ready to smile at the worst enmity of the world or fate; but suddenly, as a finely strung bow may give way, she fell into utter lassitude and depression: a heavy despair seemed to weigh on her like a hand of ice.

He had left her with tenderness, passion, grief; but he had left her.

To her it was like the fiat of their endless separation.

'Where did I fail?' she asked herself with a sort of remorse, as though the fault were hers; and her great love would not let her recognize that its own very humility, and strength, and depth, had been its foes.

When Ioris had passed away over the mountains, he had gone looking back with dim eyes and aching heart indeed; but he had gone saying to himself: 'If she were never to behold my face again, she would never give herself to any other.'

Had he not been so sure, so utterly sure, all the powers of earth would not have made him leave her, even for his honour's sake, or any other force or fate. But he knew that if he were to die that night, in body and in soul would she be widowed for ever, longing only for the kiss of death. Therefore he went secure.

Such security is the divinest part of love. But oftentimes—alas!—it does but melt passion, as the fulness of the sun melts snow into water.

She knew that he was well; she knew that he was in Paris; and she knew no more. She

did not think that he was near the woman whom he had forsaken, because he had said that to think so was to dishonour him.

Yet a darkness like the terrible blank of death seemed to her to have come between them. All her life seemed to go away with him. A delirious pain kept her sleepless through the nights; a deadly apathy kept her motionless and powerless through the days—

Dead to use and name and fame

now that the cruel charm was read. The dust gathered on the work she had begun, and the flies settled down on it undisturbed. She never looked at it but once, and then wondered wearily was it she who had ever had the power to create? Was it she who once had thought life too short and earth too small for Art? She looked back on her dead self as on some other woman, whom she watched curiously, and wondered at vaguely; Art!—all the art of the world might have perished like a burnt scroll, and she would have cared nothing, had one life been beside hers.

Which is the truth, which is the madness?—

when the artist, in the sunlit ice of a cold dreamland, scorns love and adores but one art; or when the artist, amidst the bruised roses of a garden of passion, finds all heaven on one human heart?

Both are truth; perhaps both are madness.

But it were well to die in one of them, without waking to know ourselves mad.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

At four o'clock in that golden October day, when at Rocaldi the shot nightingale lay dead underneath the palms, the Lady Joan Challoner sat in a chamber in the Rue de Rivoli. Her heavy black garments were deep with crape and all the outward signs of woe, and the notepaper before her had black edges of the broadest and the saddest; but on her face was a radiance of triumph beaming through the sun-bronze of travel; in her eyes was a shining smile of content. She was victorious.

The transfer was effected past recall.

And before her was seated Ioris.

The room was small, and close, and gaudy;

a gilt clock ticked with feverish haste. The sun came in hot and glaring from the zinc roofs opposite the windows. Ioris, in the narrow, pent-up space and the stifling atmosphere, shuddered and felt stifled; he looked worn and very ill.

He had been betrayed and misled.

So he told himself, as ruined nations tell themselves so when, through their hesitation and their disorder, they are beaten in war.

He had been drawn on from one point to another by false hopes; he had reached too late to change or arrest what he disapproved of; his endeavours had all been fruitless and his wishes overborne; he had thought to save the interests of all those who had trusted him, and he found that he had only imperilled them. The mended pot was sent rocking down the stream, and his honour was embarked, a sad and trembling passenger, on that frail venture.

He had come northwards honestly believing that he came to retrieve the fortunes of a hapless enterprise, and he found that he had only fallen into the arms of a passionate and jealous woman.

The inexorable pressure of circumstances had forced him whither he had sworn not to go; the inexorable nets of obligation had drawn him into the very peril he loathed; he had found himself face to face with her through business—only business, as she said to every one; and his doom, like that of the gold dropped in the sands and the sea of Sicily, was written.

'Io has come about the transfer,' she said to her relatives and her society.

'Io has come to me in my grief,' she said to her closer friends.

Her husband left for the baths of Taunus, though it was late in the year. The new association for Sicily sprang to light in the money market and on the thick, creamy paper of a brand-new prospectus. Ioris arrived too late to alter anything; he found that he could do nothing save sign what she wished him. Lady Joan shook out her crape, and felt that she could have ruled empires had she been called to them.

'You do look so ill, Io,' she had cried to him fondly the first hour they met. 'That is all

fretting for *me*. I will never leave you again—never, never!'

He shuddered, and was silent.

She believed what she said, and she meant what she said. In her hard, rough, cruel way she loved him—as she saw love.

None can give what they have not in them.

They sat together now in the little, gilded, close room in the Paris hotel, and she was happy. He could not escape her, and the transfer as a fact accomplished was before her sight in its printed prospectus.

Paris was dull indeed, for it was out of the season, and in her heavy crape she could not go to amusements, laugh at theatres, or walk about at open-air concerts; but it was always Paris, and she could go and dine at the cafés and drive by moonlight in the Bois, and walk about and see the shops, and divert herself in many ways—even crape veils have their uses. And he was here under her eye and hand, never to be let loose again until safe back in Fiordelisa.

Later on, that same night of his arrival, her jealous fears had assailed him.

'I hear you have been always with Etoile whilst I have been away,' she had said suddenly, her eyes fastened on his.

But Ioris, being well conscious of all that would be said to him, was impenetrably masked.

'I have seen her sometimes, of course,' he made answer.

'Is that all?'

'What more should there be?'

'I heard there was a great deal more—a great deal too much.'

'Believe what you like! It is the same to me.'

'You are cruel, Ireneo!'

'It is you who are suspicious and odious!'

'To be called that after all I have slaved to do for you, all I have suffered this cruel summer!'

'Why will you talk folly, then?'

'Is it folly?'

'Of course.'

'You have not been with her?'

'Who can have told you I have?'

'Marjory told me.'

'She is a mischief-maker; she is envious.'

'But Etoile is in love with *you*!'

'Do not say such things to me of any woman; I do not like them.'

'It is true.'

'True or false, do not say it: it is unpleasant to me.'

'Will you swear to me you do not care about her, then?'

'Why do you ask? Can you not be satisfied? Am I not here?'

She was satisfied; and being blinded and muffled in a vast vanity that prevented her from seeing anything that was not worship of herself, she never noticed that all these answers were but evasions; they were none of them such denials—firm, frank, and fierce—as the man will give who, being faithful, is suspected of infidelity.

But though merely evasions, his conscience smote him heavily for their usage. He thought he was blameless in deceiving his tyrant, but he knew himself guilty in denying one who adored him.

He seemed to see the deep scorn flash from the tranquil, studious eyes of Etoile — if she could know.

'It is only for a little while longer till all is clear ——' he said to himself, as in the evening shadows of Fiordelisa he had said to himself, 'It will be easier to write the truth.'

So he stayed on in Paris and hated himself, and with every day that rose, said, 'I will tell her, and go to Rome alone to-night.' And every day passed with the truth still untold — the fatal, unnerving influence of a violent temper and a furious will had once more fallen on him, numbing all his strength.

And another and a worse thing began to come to him — he began to be ashamed to go back to Etoile, ashamed to say to her, 'I have sinned and been faithless!'

He had made an effort to return alone; had pleaded the end of the vintage, which needed the presence of its lord. But his tyrant had raised heaven and earth, and so moved all their forces, that the formalities of business had bound him as the threads of the Lilliputians the wrecked

traveller; and there were necessities for his presence in Paris weightier and more costly to break from than the necessities of the old classic custom of the grape harvest at home.

So he stayed, galled and fretted and half broken-hearted, knowing himself befooled, knowing himself a traitor, knowing himself unfaithful where his fairest faith lay, and sat in the gilded close room, with the zinc roof shining through the lace curtains of the window, and thought of cool palm shadows, of creamy daturas and blue passion-flowers, of a white form moving slowly through the sunlit grass.

Sometimes, when he could evade his tormentor's vigilance, and leave her engrossed with some *agent de change*, or some artist, or some mirthful writer of indecent comedies, or any other of her numerous acquaintances, he would go by himself and look at the old house by the trees of the Luxembourg, which was still Etoile's, and speak of her a little with the old people left in charge there.

They let him enter once, and he sat down in the great wooden *atelier* opening on the garden,

and felt as if her presence were near him; and when they uncovered a white bust that was of herself, and done by Clesinger, he turned from the sightless eyes of the marble as one ashamed.

It was a small house with a few great rooms. It had been decorated and arranged to her own tastes. It was full of suggestions and remembrances of her, to her lover, who now knew her every fancy and every feeling. Her very presence seemed close to him. In the library, with its bronze and oak shelves and many ancient and classic books; in the great *salon*, with its few pieces of marble sculpture, its pictures, its arched alcove, with its fern and palms; in the little dining-hall, with its old Oudenard tapestry and old Rouen and ceramics—in it all a certain severity of taste that was allied with all her love of colour and grace seemed to speak to her of him.

'How unlike to all other women she is!' he thought, even as those rooms were unlike all the gilded and overloaded luxury of the day.

At other times he would go in the academies and private palaces where her works hung, and study their power, and their colour, and their

classic grace, and feel his pulse beat more quickly as he thought, 'The woman who can create those only lives for me; the Muse that reigns here is but a fond and fragile thing to me, that trembles if she grieves me, that turns pale if I but frown!'

And the sense of her power was sweet to him, because it lay like a dog at his feet.

But the moments when he was free to wander or to remember them were rare to him, for his tyrant was niggard of his liberty and a miser over his very thoughts.

Ever and again she would wound him with the thorn of some gross word, some wanton lie, some echoed calumny that she flung carelessly but brutally at the name of Etoile as a low hand throws a handful of mud against a marble statue, pleased to see the pure whiteness of it stained. He felt almost as base as she who threw it, since he did not raise his voice to save the outrage.

'She would die for me!' he thought to himself, 'and I, I have not the courage even to defend her from the senseless calumnies of jealous hate!'

And he kept a sullen silence that his tyrant translated as indifference, and, so translating, was content.

About any name brighter, any powers higher than those of the common mass of men and women, vile innuendoes, foul inventions, cowardly slanders always buzz and beat in the air as insects in the heat about the flower that bears most honey in its breast. These were in the air about the name of Etoile as about every other great gift of excelling; it was easy for another woman's jealousy to gather them together and make a poison-cloud of them, and point to it and say, 'Look how heavy the cloud is; how the stinging things cluster; there must be corruption near!'

And he longed to strike her on the mouth for her lie, yet could not, she being a woman.

One night she had a comedian and an author to dinner with her in the Rue de Rivoli. They were persons whom she had known long; they were men of mediocre talent and of dubious reputation, but they were useful to her—had been useful, might again be useful—she

invited them once whenever she passed through Paris.

The comedian had desired a part in that comedy in verse which had been one of the triumphs of Etoile. It had not been given him. The author had had a dramatic piece rejected at the great theatre where hers a little later had been so brilliantly received. Both were of that second rank in the world of literature and art which is the most bitter enemy to the leaders of that world that they possess; both had been passed over by Etoile with that indifference to their existence which was only carelessness in her, but which all took for pride.

Lady Joan launched her name on the sea of their cigar smoke when their dinner was done.

They threw themselves on it as hounds on a deer.

They tore it, they worried it, they strangled it as the deer is torn, worried and strangled; only out of the malice of mediocrity, but perhaps that is the most cruel malice that human life holds, because it is the most stupid.

Ioris sat and heard—in silence.

His tyrant watched him, but in vain. She caught no glance, she heard no word that she could construe. He might have been deaf.

When they rose to go, she bade him see them down the staircase of the hotel.

He rose and obeyed. He even ushered them to the courtyard, and through the courtyard into the street, with an impassable courtesy that flattered both very greatly.

When they were fairly in the street under the midnight skies, he struck each by turn on the lips with a glove that he had been twisting in his fingers.

'*Messieurs, vous êtes deux lâches!*' he said, very tranquilly, a sombre light shining in his eyes that startled them.

Then he turned on his heel and entered the hotel once more before either of them had recovered from his astonishment.

He felt the first contentment that he had known since he had left Rome.

He waited within the next morning, expecting some message from them, but he received none. The next day he learned that the comedian had

been arrested for debt, and the author for an offence of the press against decency.

'You have choice friends, *ma chère!*' he said to the Lady Joan, who answered him sharply:

'They wrote me that you insulted them the other evening; what did you do that for, pray? They are most excellent creatures, though a little imprudent and unfortunate.'

'They spoke too coarsely before you,' said Ioris, carelessly. She smiled, well gratified.

'And you would have made a duel and a fuss about that, and compromised *me*! You must not do such things, Io; it is dangerous.'

Ioris laughed aloud.

She did not understand his laugh.

She began dimly to fancy that she did not understand him, weak as water, docile as the silk to the hand that winds it though she had always deemed him to be. Still she was content. 'How fussy and foolish he is still about *me*!' she thought in her happy conceit. 'The idea of being so angry, just for my sake, about nothing!'

And she was vain and proud.

Yet a certain sense of anxiety entered into her. She had always known him so docile and so patient to her command. If alone, unknown to her, he could rise in such anger (though for her sake), what might he do some day for his own?

For she knew very well that she had misled him to his hurt; that she had dragged him where it was hard to walk in clean paths; that she had exposed him to bitter misconstructions and harsh obligations; that one day he might resent and revolt—who could tell?

But, after all, did it matter? She had him close and fast. If she made his fortune, gratitude must bind him for ever to her; if she had him ruined, necessity must keep him by her side. So she was content, and the days rolled on in Paris.

These days were ghastly to him; he loathed every hour of them — from the long, dreary mornings filled with interviews and correspondence on a transaction that his intelligence mistrusted and his conscience condemned, to the long, gaslit evenings spent in a *tête-à-tête* dinner

in a café, a saunter through the crowded streets, a drive by the lake, a supper at a restaurant—all the old, worn-out routine that seemed to him now so coarse, so common, so gross, so hateful.

Every moment that passed by seemed to make him tenfold a traitor; every night, looking up at the stars shining over the sea of gaslights in the Champs Elysées, he thought of a woman in his own land whom the moonlight was finding out in her solitary chamber kneeling by her bed to pray for him, or lying sleepless with wet eyes for his sake. 'She loves me so much, she will forgive even this,' he said to himself; and yet felt so base in his own sight for his faithlessness, that it seemed to him he could never look her straightly in the eyes again.

To his tyrant he did not think that he had sinned, but to Etoile he knew that he had.

'She loves me so much!' he thought; and then his hand would loosen itself from his companion's clasp, and he would move impatiently and thrust her away with a restless fretfulness.

'You are very changed,' she said to him once.

He answered her sullenly:

'You have acted without me; you have imperilled my name; you have loaded me with fresh obligations. Can you expect me to be grateful? Do not make me scenes, for heaven's sake!'

And she was stilled and vaguely alarmed, for she knew in her own secret heart that she had brought ruin and him very near one to another.

True, the mended pot was swimming gaily down the stream amongst the bronze ones, but who could tell how long it would be afloat? She had done a clever thing, and she had put money in her purse, and she was rejoicing in her strength; still, like a cold wind, there came over her the consciousness that some day Ioris might rise in fury and reproach her as his ruin.

The chill passed quickly off, the momentary spasm was soon still; she was not a woman to mistrust herself or feel the heart ache of a self-reproach. If matters turned out well, it was she who had made him do so; if ill, why, then, other people had been fools. And that was all. So

she sat in the little, hot, gilded room and read her letters, and was fiercely glad and fiercely proud because she had woven her threads so patiently and well that here Ioris was beneath the autumn sun, here by her side in Paris.

For a time there was no sound but the ticking of the gilt clock, and the scratching of her steel pen. Ioris was stretched upon a couch; his eyes were closed, his face was colourless and very weary. He was thinking — would it be possible by any plea to escape alone and go to Rome that night?

Her writing finished at length, the Lady Joan lifted her head and looked at him. She could not but see that he looked very ill and very fatigued, but it gratified her to see him so because she took it as witness for his grief at her long absence from him.

'Poor Io, how silly he is!' she said softly to herself, the self-satisfied, vain smile of complete complacency breaking over her face and softening its harsher lines; and she rose and leaned a little over him, and brushed a fly from off his low, broad brow.

Ioris startled, lifted himself with a sudden, quick movement from the cushions of the couch. As he did so a letter fell from between his shirt and waistcoat. He caught it rapidly, but not so rapidly but what she had seen its superscription.

'That is the writing of Etoile!' she cried, and snatched his wrist and held his hand motionless.

'It is her writing,' she said between her teeth. 'Give it me—do you hear me?—give it me!'

But he was more agile than she.

He twisted his wrist out of her grasp, and with a rapid action tossed the letter on to the fire glowing in the open stove.

It flamed in a moment; in another moment it was but a few grey ashes on the wood.

'You have secrets from me! She writes to you! You dare to deceive me!'

The words hissed through the air about his head like a volley of arrows; she screamed, she raved, she poured abuse and upbraiding from her lips in torrents of flame.

'You have secrets from me!' she cried once

more in her fury. 'That woman loves you, writes to you—you carry her letters in your breast—and I ——. Oh, you traitor—you faithless coward!'

His face grew dark, and he looked at her one moment with a cold, pale rage, with an impulse that, followed, would have given him back his manhood and his peace.

'If I be faithless and a coward, I am the thing you make me'—the answer sprang to his lips, and with it all the truth.

But once again was chance against him.

The door of their sitting-room opened; there entered one of her fellow-financiers fresh from the Bourse, where the shares of the new company were being liberally favoured and purchased.

She choked the wrath into silence, as only finance could have had power to make her do; and, with lowering brows and eyes of flame, forced a smile for the bringer of good tidings. The financier was a Jew of Gallicia; he was voluble and vivacious; he had much to say, and was eager to say it; he was inquisitive, and not delicate; he stayed a long time, though he saw

that the air he sat in was charged with a storm, and he was too important and too necessary to be lightly dismissed or dealt with harshly.

The face of Ioris had grown expressionless and unrevealing; he had had time to stifle his impulse to assume his mask. At his heart a sudden rage was eating, but he smothered it, and resumed a glacial graceful calm.

When the door closed on their visitor, she flashed her glittering eyes of steel upon him.

'*Now* answer me, if you can—if you dare ——'

'I have no secrets of my own from you,' he answered her chillily. 'But you must allow me to keep the secrets of others. I could not do less than burn the letter of any woman rather than have it read by any other—even by you.'

She looked at him savagely, questioningly; his eyes met hers with a cold, impenetrable serenity in their dark depths.

He had made up his mind to baffle her at any cost. He succeeded.

'The secrets of others!' she echoed. 'You mean that she has a passion for you, and that you

care nothing for her—is that what you mean? Is that why you burnt her letter?'

Ioris was silent.

Silence gives consent.

'You might have shown it to me,' she muttered. 'You ought to have shown it to me whatever it was. To burn it——'

'The woman I love is the last that I could show it to, surely,' said Ioris, with his cold smile unchanged, and his eyes impenetrable. He could have laughed aloud at the ironical equivoque, even whilst every drop of blood in him burned with a sullen anger. But to her vanity and self-delusion the answer was a triumph and a joy.

'Then you admit she loves you?' she cried aloud.

'That is what I never admit of any woman, to either woman or man.'

His voice had a soft, icy chill in it; his eyes had their changeless impenetrability.

She screamed, and clapped both hands above her head.

'As if you didn't admit it by that very answer to me! Oh you chivalrous ass, Io!—to give

yourself all these grand airs, and almost make *us* quarrel. What nonsense; what stuff! I always saw she was scheming to entangle you. I always saw she was wild about you——'

'Hush, hush! Is a ruined man such fine prey?'

'Ruined! you have Fiordelisa, and you are going to make your fortune through *me*. Besides, are you not always Prince Ioris? I tell you I always saw her designs—yes, the very first night she came to us. With all her wonderful talent she could not hide it from me. And to write to you, unasked! How unwomanly; how disgraceful! You were far too considerate and too clement in burning her letter. What do such women deserve? But how does she know you are here?'

A sudden awakening suspicion flashed freshly across her, and interrupted the flood of her just indignation and of her chaste disgust.

Ioris stood, still, opposite to her, with his back to the light; a more observant woman would have seen the strain in his calm, the rigidity in his expression, the enforced indifference and

restraint; but she observed none of them. She was not observant; she was only suspicious.

'How could she know you were in Paris?' she said again. He answered coldly:—

'No doubt it is known in Rome. My servants——'

'Oh, if she is low enough to go to your servants!' cried his tyrant, 'I dare say she is; well, if she ask, she will know you are with *me*' (she did not note the spasm that passed over the rigidity of his features). 'She will know you are with me. How dare she write; how dare she?——'

'*Chère*,' said Ioris, with a smile, whose bitterness escaped her. '*Chère*, you forget; our friendship, sweet as it is and sacred to me, is not a bond that the world respects very much; she may not understand its sanctity. That is possible.'

'Then she should be made to understand,' said Lady Joan, curtly.

Ioris was silent.

'The forward wretch, to dare to write,' muttered his companion, glancing longingly at the grey ashes in the stove; she felt that she would

never wholly pardon him for burning that letter so, before her very eyes.

'Let us go out for our drive,' she said less fiercely, 'and as we go, I will tell you all I heard of her from my dear father, before he left us for that fatal cruise. We will dine up at Madrid; the nights are so fine; and there is a full moon still. Nobody will recognise me with my veil on, will they?'

The hours that followed were sickly as hours of fever to Ioris.

The dusty roads; the seared and reddening trees; the passage by the lake, so different to what he had known it when the Second Empire had been in its gilded glory; the dinner at Madrid; the cigars on the wooden balcony; the garden where the gaudy dahlias were dying; the creepers that were faded and seared; they were all loathsome to him. He hated the flare of the lights; he hated the smell of the smoke; most of all he hated himself.

'I am faithless; faithless!' he said to his conscience; and his conscience echoed—faithless.

It seemed to him that the moon-rays slanting in through the balcony windows seeing him would find their way to the dreamer in Rome, and say to her, 'Dream no more; he is faithless to you.'

It was for this that he had left her! this exhausted mockery of love; this shame and satire of passion; this gross, grotesque, unlovely union of violence, of voluptuousness, of mercenary greed and guile! The white rays of the moon seemed to pierce him like Ithuriel's spear.

They saw him here.

They saw Etoile where she slept in Rome.

He was disgusted with himself.

He felt himself scarcely higher or nobler than the men whom he had struck on the mouth with his glove.

He had surrendered her to the violence and coarseness of a jealous woman.

He had let a base and unreturned passion be imputed to her and had held his peace.

He had let a lie like a serpent wind round and enfold her, and had not lifted his hand to pluck it off; nor lifted his heel to stamp its poisonous, flat, hissing head lifeless for ever.

And in vain he said to his conscience: 'It is only for a little while; a few days more——'

In vain; for he knew that he should have strangled the lie at its birth; that he should have risen and said manfully to his tyrant:

'I am yours no more; I am hers for ever.'

CHAPTER XL.

It was a cheerless day in the late autumn, and Rome was drenched with chilly dusky rains, dark and dreary and depressing, swept with high winds, and overhung with mist and cloud.

It was six o'clock in the grim old palace where the Scrope-Stairs dwelt by the Forum Trajani; it was the first day of the rites of the tea-urn and the gathering of the incoming spinsters and dowagers in that holy quarter. All the matrons and virgins of the Inviolate Isle and of the Free Republic had not yet arrived in Rome, but many had done so; many had come thither that dark, drear afternoon to

partake of the bohea that was purification, and the muffin that was a voucher.

The religious rites were over; only two or three of the familiars of the place were lingering: they were Mr. Silverly Bell and Mrs. Macscrip, and the maiden lady who had written so learnedly on the Penalties and the Privileges of Vestals.

They still stood round the fire, conversing.

'Is she still here?' said Mrs. Macscrip.

'Still here' said Mr. Silverly Bell.

'Taken that beautiful place that is called Rocaldi?'

'Yes, and the rooms by the Rospigliosi also. It must cost a great deal to live as she does.'

'How does she do it? How can she do it?'

'Ah, how indeed? No capital, you know. Makes money certainly; makes money—but what is that?'

'Why doesn't she go back to Paris? She has a house there they say, and one would think all her interests——'

'Ah!' Mr. Silverly Bell smiled first, and then sighed very deeply.

'Artists are all alike!' added Mr. Silverly

Bell, with a tender regret over the sad shortcomings of genius.

'I hope we shall never meet her any more in society,' said the author of the 'Privileges and Penalties,' and she shuddered between each word.

'Not likely,' said Mr. Silverly Bell, with another sigh, and took a letter out of his pocket.

'Here is a little portion I can read to you without any violation of confidence, and written me a few weeks ago by our dear absent friend; what her poor father said to her before he went on that fatal cruise to Scotland; he could never express himself with sufficient indignation at its ever having been imagined as possible that he could have presented her to Lady Joan. It is all very sad.'

And he read the extract from the letter in a low mellow voice, with a touching melancholy accent.

'My poor father told me a few days before he left for that fatal cruise that he never had known her at all, except just as men do know women of no character; going in and out of studios and

seeing her in the crowd, when the Salon opened. He could not be furious enough at its ever having been dreamt that he could have sent her to *me*! You may contradict it everywhere. My father always thought the worst of her. I believe her very pictures are not her own.'

'Is it not sad?' said the reader again, as he finished this communication.

'Poor dear Lady Joan,' said Mrs. Macscrip. 'Infamous indeed! To abuse her hospitality in such a manner! But she is so sweetly confiding.'

'Yes, so fatally frank herself, you see. She never has a suspicion of evil.'

'A beautiful character!'

'Most noble, yes. But sure to be abused.'

'Sure to be,' echoed Mr. Silverly Bell, 'and its kindness traded on. She should have thought, enquired, been more cautious, before receiving a person merely recommended to her by so notoriously bad a man as the Baron Voightel; a great man indeed, as we all know, but an excessively unscrupulous one. A man may discover a continent, and yet be unfit for all the decencies of ordinary life.'

All the ladies sighed with him, and old Lady George, straining her deaf ear to hear as she knitted, muttered over her lambswool—

'Bad? a cannibal! I have heard him confess that he ate human flesh, and preferred it to butcher's meat. He told me so.'

'If that were all!' said Mr. Silverly Bell, gently, 'One might conceive the horrible agonies of hunger in shipwreck driving a man even to such frightful extremity as that. But in cold blood, in everyday life, to introduce a notorious adventuress to a noble and blameless lady——'

'Can you call a great artist an adventuress?' said sleepy Lord George, with a gleam of humour shining in his watery dim eyes.

'It is an expression,' said Mr. Silverly Bell hastily. 'A common expression. A usual expression. When one knows nothing of a person, of whence they came, of how they exist——'

'Etoile banks at Hottinguer's. I wish I did,' said Lord George, with a little sad mirth in the twinkle of his eyes. 'If she have taken a fancy to Ioris I think he is very much to be envied; I wish I were he; what does he

go away for? He is a silly fellow if he don't know his good fortune.'

'Good fortune!' echoed Mr. Silverly Bell, in horror. 'My dear sir, excuse me, are you mad? What worse could happen to our charming, but too vacillating, friend, than to fall into the power of an unscrupulous woman of genius who——'

'You think an unscrupulous woman without genius better? Well to be sure, he has got that now,' muttered Lord George, fumbling for his snuff-box. But his daughters stifled the atrocious words in their screams.

'Papa, how can you! How dare you! Of course you only say it for fun, but still——'

Lord George shuffled off into an inner room out of the storm; Mr. Silverly Bell resumed—

'Who, because she only understands the baseness of lawless passions herself, is utterly incapable of comprehending the purity of a simple friendship, such as a woman that is all *mind* takes delight in; a woman that is all *mind* never thinks of the misconceptions that her innocence and noble actions may be open to; Lady Joan is all Mind. She has done the most wonderful

things in London and Paris; entirely saved the whole Messina affair from ruin by her energy and promptitude; it is impossible to say what the shareholders do not owe to her; and then, just because a mere friend, who is a director of the affair, has naturally to go over to Paris to negotiate a loan with Erlanger or Rothschilds (I think it is Rothschilds), foul-mouthed people pretend that he is gone over for *her*; that he is her lover; that—oh, it is disgusting, quite disgusting!' said Mr. Silverly Bell, breaking off with eloquent abruptness as his feelings grew too strong for his habitual suavity.

Prim and proper little Mrs. Macscrip stroked his arm consolingly. 'Dear Mr. Bell, do you suppose *anybody* worth thinking *twice* about ever dreams of anything *wrong* with dear frank Lady Joan and dear good Mr. Challoner? Impossible —quite impossible!'

'If all the world were as excellent as Mrs. Macscrip it would be impossible,' said Mr. Silverly Bell gallantly. 'It should be impossible, even foul-mouthed as the world is,' he said more bitterly. 'But she is all *mind*, and she forgets that

a base tongue always attributes a base motive. She was utterly amazed to see Ioris in Paris. She tells me so. He went over quite unexpectedly on a telegram from Erlanger or Rothschild, I think it was Rothschild; and of course he went to see her—what more natural, with such business interests as theirs are in common. But a mere simple thing like that is enough for calumny!'

And tears suffused the gentle pale eyes of Mr. Silverly Bell.

At that moment in from a bed-chamber adjoining came the youngest daughter; she was excited and eager, even more than her wont, and her thin features were quivering with agitation.

'A telegram from dearest Joan,' she said breathless with emotion, 'from Perugia. She arrives to-night, in an hour's time. We are all to meet her.'

'Delighted,' murmured Mr. Silverly Bell, a little envious. 'I will go also. Seven o'clock—the train from Mont Cenis, I think? Is it Mont Cenis? Did you know she was coming so soon? She wrote me next week.'

'She meant to have waited till next week.

She does not say what has hastened her. She only says—"Meet me, seven to-night." Dearest Joan!'

'You must go and get ready, dears; I might take you in my landau,' said Mrs. Macscrip, who was always good-natured to quite proper people.

'Oh, no, that would detain you too long and we are too many, thanks so much,' said Marjory fluently. 'Mr. Bell will get us a cab; Mr. Bell will escort us. Dear Joan! You can understand my delight, I am sure. We have not seen her since May! An eternity! Dear Joan!—and after such grief as she has had too!'

Then the guests took their leave, and Mr. Silverly Bell poured himself out a weak cup of tea and talked to Lady George about her knitting, and the Scrope-Stairs daughters went and robed themselves in waterproofs and thick veils, and went out into the misty rain and howling winds with their escort. And the heart of one of them beat high.

'I hope she is not all alone, you know,' she said to their escort. 'I do hope she is not all

alone; I should think Ioris is sure to have come with her.'

'Oh, I should think so,' answered Mr. Silverly Bell. 'Challoner being still away in Germany, they would not let her travel alone with her maid —naturally he will have returned with her; most naturally.'

For Mr. Silverly Bell, in his way as a friend, was quite priceless—unless he quarrelled with you; until he quarrelled with you he would see you through anything, with his smile and his sigh at your service.

Marjory never felt the streaming rain, the piercing winds.

In her own small way she was triumphant, vicariously she was victorious; for she was sure that Ioris was returning, or else never would her friend be coming over the mountains.

He would not be hers indeed, but she felt that to see him in the old, worn fetters tread the old, dull paths would be almost happiness compared with the agony of the summer, which had seen him pass to new joys, where the passion-flowers embraced the palms. The woman who, un-

loved herself, loves a prisoner, can bear her fate whilst daily she can see him behind his bars pacing to and fro his joyless cell; but when release comes, and the ship of good tidings bears him free over the sea to fresh joys under fairer skies—then, then indeed she knows bitterness, unless she be a very noble woman, and Marjory Scrope was not noble. She had betrayed the captive's flight; she had locked the chains anew about his feet, that so at least she might keep him in her sight and still the hunger of her aching heart. She was a merciless, jealous, envious soul, but being a maiden of good name and of good society, she did not let these cruel passions rise to the surface to be seen of men; instead, she cloaked herself in waterproof and friendship, and hastened through the foggy night to meet her dearest Joan.

The train was late; the night was very cold and rainy. Mr. Silverly Bell, despite the warmth of his rejoicing, shivered as he paced the stone floor of the waiting hall; but Marjory was burning hotly with the fever of hope and the joy of success. She strained her

ear, she strained her eyes; her heart beat quickly, her pale, waxen features flushed.

'I do so long to see her, darling Joan!' she said, with breathless lips. The bells clanged, the doors were thrown open, the throng of travellers poured out in the gaslight and mist, in the gloom and the rain. Foremost among the crowd, she saw grey eyes like steel, a flash of white teeth, a sunbrowned face with a crape veil tossed from above it. As she threw her arms about the advancing form, and welcomed her, her eager glance saw another face in the shadow farther back—a face pale, cold, very weary; the face of a proud man, unwilling and ashamed.

Then Marjory said in her heart her psalm of praise.

The fetters were fresh locked.

'Are you all here, dears?—and darling St. Paul too?' cried Lady Joan. 'How good of you, such an awful evening as it is! Ah, yes, my grief—such grief indeed! Io, have you got my jewel-case safe? The tickets?—oh, Io has them.'

So she returned in triumph.

Who would ask her what she had done in Paris? Who would mind how she had returned, or with whom? Who would dare to comment on her travels, since she had the wit to be met at the station by these irreproachable maidens and their venerable and venerated escort?

Other women might find such a journey from Paris land them in endless troubles and obloquy, but she knew how to make such adventures innocent as milk and harmless as a dove, only by sending a telegram—one telegram that had cost her a franc!

Society is often bought cheaply, but not often so cheaply as that.

'*Tue-la*!' cries a famous writer, preaching the old, natural, just crusade of man against the faithless wife.

'*Tue-la*!'—his Guenon de Noé grins, from one of her small ears to the other, at the absurd, antiquated notion as she troops, with hundreds like her, through society, applauded, welcomed, well content, smiling complacently in the face of a world that smiles complacently at her.

'*Tue-la*!'—why, she laughs aloud. Who

should kill her? Her husband? Behold him as he comes meekly in her wake, joking good-humouredly with the person by whom, in barbarous ages, he might have imagined himself injured! Society? She caresses Society, and Society kisses her in return on both cheeks. The Ape of Noah might be the Dove of Noah for the olive branches that she offers and sees accepted.

'Kill her!'—the law has been re-written.

Far away is the day when, in old Judæa, they led such women as she out under the meridian sun, and bared them naked, and stoned them to death in the sight of the people, so that their name should be a byeword and a reproach through all the land.

The law has been re-written.

The Ape of Noah may smile against the sun; she may sit in the seat of honour; men shall praise and women salute her with a kiss; for her there is no need of night and darkness; she may take her pleasure in peace and pride, and no voice shall arraign her; and at the banquets of her world, the one whom it pleases her to choose

from others shall be summoned beside her in tender forethought of her fond desire.

'Kill her!' The re-written law says to her:—

'You shall enjoy the sum and substance of all vice; you shall draw your lover within your chamber whilst your child sleeps against the chamber wall; you shall be guilty, and your world shall know your guilt; yet if your lord be only as base as you, all things shall go well with you — you shall say your empty shibboleth of "friendship," and the world will let you say it and receive you.'

True, if you were not guilty, but only took pleasure in counterfeiting a guilt you had not, you would be a still poorer and more contemptible thing even than you are now; true, if it were as you say, and you were innocent, you would be the very fool of fools to play thus upon the housetops the antics of a sin you have not; true, turn you which way you will, you must be either the silliest or the basest of all women.

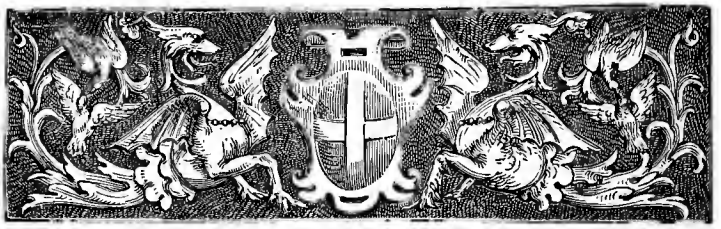
But you are many in number, and you agree to stuff your shibboleth down the yawning throat

of your world, and you are strong by reason that you have so many sisters; and so you turn the face of the world to you and set it smiling, as he who keeps the key of a clock sets the hands of the clock to noonday. The day of passion is gone, with the old heroical ages; the day of devotion has fled away to the dreamland of poets; the day even of sin that was honest has passed as a foe too frank.

Your day has dawned, and is at its meridian —the day of lust that folds its arm within prudence, of pale love that is hid in the warm cloak of convenience.

When the day of truth comes where will you be?

In your grave, with marble Virtues weeping over your name in letters of gold. For the law has been re-written.



CHAPTER XLI.

It was night, and Etoile sat alone.

The lamps had been lighted, and shed a mellow glow over the great room, the pale busts and white marbles, the dusky outlines of powerful sketches in charcoals, the green drooping fronds of palms and ferns, the faint soft hues of old frescoes and older arazzi.

The unfinished picture of the Sordello stood on a great oak easel untouched since the day that Ioris had left her; only one thing was perfected in it, and that was the face of the poet; the face there was that of Ioris.

She sat alone, doing nothing. For the first time in all her life her hours were empty: came

without welcome, departed without use. These full rich studious days which, before she had known him, had always seemed too short, and never had one vacant moment that was not sweet through labour or through dreams, how far away they seemed! They were as dead as the dead birds that she had buried in her childhood under the green leaves in green Ardennes.

'Oh my love, my love; what you have cost me!' she thought, with the scalding tears rushing to her eyes; yet even though he had cost her a hundredfold more bitter pangs she would not but have had his life cross hers: she never for one instant wished that they had never met.

To have been happy once: it is so much. Well is he who made us so, pardoned all after cruelty or pain.

The winds roared angrily without through the yellowed passion vines whose flowers were dead. The rains beat on the long grass, and the leafless boughs against the wooden shutters.

There was an ebon crucifix in the dusk beyond the lamplight; above it hung the first

portrait she had ever made of him; she kneeled there and wept bitterly, and prayed for him.

The door unclosed gently.

He came into the shadow, and thence into the light. He was pallid as death, weary, worn, ashamed. She looked up and saw him through the mist of her tears; with a cry of unutterable joy she sprang to him.

In a little while he loosened his arms from about her and sank down at her feet.

'You are the good angel of my soul! What can I say to you? Will you forgive?——'

She leaned her hands upon his shoulder as he kneeled there, and thrust him backward, gazing on his face, she felt as if a knife had pierced her heart.

'You have been——with her?'

The words were so low they seemed to stifle her as she spoke them.

His face drooped till it was hidden on her knees. She knew then that he had sinned against her. He knew then that to have been faithless to her was the darkest infidelity of all his life.

CHAPTER XLII.

THERE was a long silence, broken only by the sound of the falling rain in the darkness without. His arms were still about her, his face still buried on her knees.

'Can you forgive?' he muttered at length. 'Dear, I said the truth. I never meant to go to her. I was deceived, misled, drawn on to where I loathed to be. When I left you I never foresaw what she would do. I have sinned against you, but never with my heart.'

She put his arms away from her, and lifted her head with a sense of suffocated pain.

'You have been with her,' she echoed once again. She felt as if her own lips were polluted,

as if her own life were full of unutterable shame, and scorn, and outrage.

A man cannot perhaps know all that a woman suffers from his infidelity. Hers to him may wring his pride and his passions with a great agony, but it cannot seem all at once to bring intense humiliation, intense desecration, personal and spiritual, with it as does his to her. It cannot make him ashamed to exist, as it makes her. Moreover, he has his vengeance: she is helpless.

'You have been with her!' she repeated: and had the knife been truly in her breast, it would have hurt her less than this.

'I have confessed it,' he muttered wearily. 'Men are weak and vile; we are not worth a thought. All the while I have hated myself, and yet——My angel, look at me! Do not look like that! You frighten me, Etoile!'

'Your angel! And you could——!'

A burning flush overspread her face; then she grew deathly pale; she strove with trembling hands to put his hands away from her; she could not endure that he should touch her; a dull

confused murmur seemed surging in her ears; she felt faint and blind.

Then all at once the bands of pain at her heart seemed to loosen; a great sob rose in her throat; she shrank away from him and wept bitterly.

Ioris gathered her weeping thus in his arms, and kissed her on her closed eyelids.

'She will forgive now,' he thought. 'If she would not forgive me, she would not weep. Women that are vain and are hard, do not grieve—they avenge.'

And his sin seemed slight to him, because it was pardoned.

'Are the passion-flowers dead, dear?' he said caressingly. 'Well, they will bloom another summer, and they will find your love and mine lovelier than ever, will they not? My treasure, why will you weep so? I am here with you once more. And you forgive me—ah, yes, you forgive me, you are one of the women that forgive. You would kiss my hand if it stabbed you!'

CHAPTER XLIII.

MEANWHILE in the Turkish room Lady Joan was smoking. All the racket of hasty arrival, all the disorder of long travel, were about her, but she was happy. She had come back successful. Who can want more than success? Tongues were going gaily around her; Mimo sat on the sofa beside her, and Guido Serravalle on a stool at her feet; Marjory Scrope was making her tea, and Mr. Silverly Bell was arranging her lamps.

'Io's gone to his own house with a headache,' she said to her companions; but it did not disturb her; the transfer was made and he was safe back in Rome. He had always a head-

ache after a journey, and it certainly was very cold coming over the mountains.

She herself had no headache, nor any ills at all. She never had, unless it were desirable at any moment to appear an invalid; she was bronzed, bright-eyed, animated, amicable, even gay beyond her wont, till she remembered she was in mourning. She was glad to be home again; glad to have managed so well; glad to have brought her captive in her train; glad to shine in the lamplight before the eyes of her adorers as a very Semiramis of Finance.

Ioris was absent indeed; he was sullen, cold, unwell, but that was not of very much consequence; she had had him with her in Paris; she had brought him with her to Rome; that was all that really mattered: she was even glad he was away; she had so many teacups and triptychs to account for with Mimo, and tuneful Guido was a sillier young goose than ever as he sat at her feet.

'You were quite wrong about all that,' she took a moment to whisper to her watchdog. 'Oh, yes, you were, dear, quite wrong; he cannot

endure Etoile, she persecutes him; actually wrote to him in Paris; would you believe it?'

The pallid skin of Marjory Scrope flushed painfully.

'Are you sure he does not care?' she said, nervously.

'Sure? Do you think anybody can ever deceive me?'

'But indeed ——,' began her poor watchdog.

'He cannot endure her,' said Lady Joan, clinching the matter. 'He tore her letter into shreds before me—he was so disgusted. Io has no secrets from me, you know—no more than he would have had from a sister.'

Marjory kissed her with effusion.

'So glad to have you home, darling!' she murmured; for indeed she felt that here was a gaoler from whom no escape would be possible for the prisoner, whom she herself could only see if he remained behind the bars of his prison-house. She was certain that her lynx-eyed friend was blinded; she could not herself forget those summer evenings when the shadow of Ioris had passed under the palms, and she had seen him so

pass, watching under the cistus shrub of the open plains. She could not forget, and she was not deceived. But she forebore to press her convictions home. What her friend chose to ignore, she would ignore also; what she chose to impute, she would impute likewise. She had supreme faith in her friend's power to hold and keep: faith so great that she kissed her in all sincerity.

The gaoler was so much better than the barque of good tidings that would bear him away to fair and free countries!

Marjory, going home in the blowing winds and rains that night, felt a dull yet fierce pleasure stir at her heart. She was quick to catch a clue, she was swift to follow a hint, and she was cruel as unloved and unlovely women often are.

This woman whom she hated, this Muse whom she envied, this cold and careless celebrity who could sit amidst her flowers doing nothing, this stranger whom Ioris loved, was to be called the fool of a hopeless passion!—the vengeance was sweet to this lone maiden whose own hopeless passion had been the mockery of her little world. She

did not know how the lie was to be fastened, how the story was to be told; but she had firm faith in her friend and in her powers of falsehood.

'Joan will separate them,' she said to her own sick heart with a cruel joy, going home in the beating rain. She herself could only wait, as echo waits till it is summoned.

For the few next succeeding days Lady Joan was in a whirl of business and contentment. There was a multitude of things to see after and arrange—all the threads to be taken up that bound the Temple of On, the venture to Mimo's shop and Trillo's studio; Mrs. Grundy and Mrs. Candour to be called on and propitiated, lest they should see anything odd in that Paris sojourn and homeward journey; all the winter's campaign through Society to be thought over and mapped out; and, beyond all, the newly-painted pot to be set on high, with its glittering charms gleaming on its glaze.

The pot would not long hold water — no mended pot ever does; but it looked very well, and made a beautiful effect, and that was all that was wanted. On the whole, on these first days

nothing indeed, but the new ones were to get everything — make their fortunes, in point of fact; and as any old shareholder could become a new one if he liked to buy new shares, what, in heaven's name, had he to complain about? His money was gone down in the sand amongst the crabs and the barnacles, and the winds and the waters alone were responsible for that misfortune. If the old shareholder would not buy a dredger to get it up again in the shape of fresh shares, it was clearly his own fault if it remained at the bottom, or if the more enterprising new shareholder dredged for it.

So at least Lady Joan said, and she knew all about these things, and had dwelt in the Land of Goschen, where money is always going down in the sand.

Ioris was bitterly dissatisfied and disquieted indeed, and the Duke of Oban had withdrawn himself in a fury and fume, and nasty people said that the old shareholders would have still demanded an enquiry in public tribunals only that they were loath, as timid human beings are, to throw good money after bad. But Ioris never

understood anything (at least, so she said), and old Oban was a muff and an idiot; and the old shareholders might bluster till they were hoarse —it was all their own faults if they would stand still and scream, instead of coming dredging again as they might do. So she settled everything to her own complete satisfaction; and when she was satisfied herself, she was not over much given to heeding the dissatisfaction of others.

The new dredgers would go on dredging for a few years, and the engineers would go on driving new piles in to please the crabs, and Tunis would always be on the horizon and Malta on the sea; and if the new shareholders could not make the bridge stand, or the mails come and go by it, it would be their own fault—in the future! Nobody would be responsible except the sea. When the tides are against you, you can always come into court with a clear conscience and quote Canute (Knut, as we are told we ought to write it). She was always quoting Canute now, and could always do so equally hereafter.

'No speculation is infallible,' she would say.

So that she was in high spirits in this rough rainy weather that followed her return to Rome. Her husband had not yet come over the mountains; her slaves and courtiers were all at hand about her; her mourning was useful, for it evoked so much sympathy, and some people out of sympathy called on her that had not called before; night and day she was busied with the new shares and the new agencies and the new enterprise: she was in paradise. Ioris held himself aloof indeed; Ioris seemed dull and cold and grave, said he was unwell, left her to herself very much, but what of that? He had chosen to sulk about the transfer—let him! He could not alter the fact of it; and he would recover his temper in time, so she said. Meanwhile there was Douglas Græme fresh from chamois hunting, and Guido Serravalle eager to sing the same songs, and Mimo and Trillo, those Tyndarids of art, both ready to run about with her into society, east and west; Lady Joan was happy.

Was she going to make herself miserable because Ioris sulked in a corner and accused her of having jeopardised his honour?—not she! He

might frown as he liked ; she had got the transfer, and she had got Fiordelisa.

She put her hands in her coat pockets and a cigar in her mouth, and drove over to Fiordelisa, with Mr. Silverly Bell and young Guido Serravalle and his lute by her side.

'I have saved the place for Ioris,' she said to everyone ; it was a title the more to it.

'Did the Prince come here with anybody whilst I was away ?' she asked of the peasants, as she visited the pigs.

They told her that he had come seldom, and been always alone.

'Then of course there never was anything between him and Etoile,' she thought with great content. 'He would have brought her here first, of all places, at once if there had been.'

For such follies as delicate instinct and lofty passions never occurred to her. She was clever, but she made a common error of some clever people ; she judged others by herself. This kind of error, however, conduces to content, and Lady Joan was content, and, as she rambled about,

thought that next year she would really have that frost-bite of ruin, and winter here.

Imperator would never get an hour of liberty then, nor his master.

'To think *I* have saved the dear old place! It is so delightful!' she said again and again to her companions, and said it so often that she ended in believing it herself.

'She has saved his estate for him!' cried her friends after her in chorus with strophe and anti-strophe of praise, marvel, and applause.

It was a fine day, though cold, this first day that she had visited Fiordelisa. The snow was on the mountains, and she wished that it might be thick enough to block up Mr. Challoner in Germany, but in the green plains the sea wind was blowing not unkindly, and the yellow colchicum cups were glancing amongst the grasses. She spent a short day, but a bright day, rejoicing to seize her sceptre and her scales, to set her foot down heavily on the innocent little freedoms that aged servants had taken in her absence, to see the household all hurry and skurry like trembling schoolboys, the dog cower, and the steward turn

of her return she was more than even satisfied; she was brilliantly triumphant.

True, although the affairs of the bridge were going on again, and the crabs and the barnacles were having more planks driven into their native waters to become their home in due time; true, the Società Inglese Italiana—be it under whatever name it might be—was much like that famous knight of woeful story who, whether he ran in doublet of blue, or red, or green, ran always equally ill and tilted direfully. But the brass plate on the modern door in the old palace down in Trastevere had its inscription altered from that of the Ponte Calabrese-Siciliano to that of the Promotrice delle Communicazioni Meridionale, and the prospectus read quite differently, and Tunis came into it, and much was made of the mails from Malta; and altogether it was quite a new thing—to look at—if underneath it remained very much the same as a lady's face does under the kolk and the paint and the pearl powder. Mr. Challoner was to keep his crook and sit at his handsome desk when he liked; the old shareholders were to get

red over his books, to feel her power all over the old house and the old lands and the old people.

She had a happy day, though a brief one, and drove back to Rome as the sun set, feeling that truly for a wise woman all joys of this world are possible.

'Is that adventuress woman here still?' she said to her companions, as they drove across the burning amber glow that rested on the plain.

'What adventuress?'

'Etoile.'

'Oh, yes, she is in her solitude at Rocaldi.'

'Always at Rocaldi?'

'Yes.'

'Is she painting?'

'They say not; she has finished nothing; some say she is ill.'

Lady Joan smiled.

'Ill!' she echoed, and she lighted a new cigar. 'She has never come to me; never written me a word; I knew she never would when once I had seen my father.'

Mr. Silverly Bell sighed; he was always compassionate.

'She is in love with Io, you know—actually sent him letters to Paris!' she continued.

'Indeed?' said Mr. Silverly Bell cautiously; 'and he ——?'

'Hates her!' said the Lady Joan. 'Io knows nothing about love, you know; he is like me; he only cares for friendship!'

Mr. Silverly Bell coughed; not knowing quite what to say.

Fortunately there was a very fine sunset, and he made a remark on it.

The Lady Joan drove onward with a smile on her face; it pleased her to think of Etoile, ill, with her pictures untouched.

She set down her companions at their respective destinations, and then turned the heads of her steeds to the house of Ioris by the Piazza del Gesù. There was still a dull red glow from the west suffusing the city.

He was absent, but she entered as her habit was, and brushed past his servant up the staircase to his own little chamber.

'I want some papers for your master,' she said to him.

The servant dared not oppose her entrance wheresoever she might choose to go. It was quite true that she wanted some papers; papers concerning the new society that had sprung to life under her fostering care; papers that she knew were on his table. The little room was dark, but she struck a match and lit a candle, and began unceremoniously her search amidst the letters, books, and documents of all sorts that were scattered over his bureau. She knew all his ways and all the hiding places of his desk, and rummaged in them without remorse, searching for what she wanted, the eyes of her own portrait looking down on her from the chamber wall.

Suddenly amidst her search through the mass of business correspondence and ceremonious letters on ceremonials of the court, she saw a handwriting which made all the blood leap to her face, and her hand seized the note that bore it as a cat seizes prey.

It was a note of Etoile's, written that day, and left by him there in an unwonted carelessness, instead of being consigned to that secret drawer of which his visitor did not possess the secret.

'No one can be perfectly sure that they have Providence and all his in-and-outs on their side. One can only do one's best to succeed.'

After all, it does not very much matter whether you succeed or not when you are only that blessing of providence—a promoter.

Besides, Lady Joan was beginning to think that a little touch of ruin might not be altogether disadvantageous. Not such ruin as will end in bailiffs and no dinner to eat; not real ruin such as some of those silly shareholders were screaming about as their fate; but a little touch of poetical ruin, or rather retrenchment. It would look well, as if one had sacrificed a good deal in driving the piles in the sand, so she meditated, as if one also had been a victim to the tides and the winds; besides, if one had to retrench, one might have to live altogether at Fiordelisa—why not? The great old house was full of sun and had carpets. On the whole, she was not sure, if necessary, that she would not be ruined a little. She was a clever woman, and could draw usefulness out of everything, as Southern farmers get good olives out of old rags.

He had put it back in its envelope, moved it hastily under a pile of letters, and gone out quickly to go to Rocaldi.

Lady Joan read it.

It was not of great length, but there were words in it that told her all the truth hidden from her so long. She read it thrice; all the blood fading out of her face, while her teeth clenched like the jaws of a steel trap.

She had been befooled, beguiled, betrayed. And at length she knew it.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Her first impulse was that of any wounded tigress: to spring and rend and kill.

A sort of madness seized her; in her fury she would have slain him at a blow had he been there before her. A thousand fires flashed before her swimming eyes; a thousand hammers seemed beating on her brain; the room reeled around her; she could have screamed aloud, but her tongue clove to her mouth: she stood and stared down on the letter in the dull light of the flickering taper and knew herself befooled, beguiled, betrayed.

Vengeance alone seemed to her worth living for; to kill them both as tigers kill.

There was fierceness enough in her blood, and strength enough in her nerve, to have driven the steel straight home through flesh and bone without ever wavering once.

But it is women who love, even if they love guiltily, that kill: she loved herself. The little chamber was very still, the light of the taper very dim; in the silence and the calmness and the solitude the paroxysm passed away—she remembered the world.

The fierceness of her fury seethed and hissed itself into a sullen calm; she was alone and there was nothing for the tempest to destroy, it raged, impotent, and spent itself.

Prudence, which soon tempered her passions, to harden them the more as the cold flood of water hardens the heated steel, returned to her.

What use is it for you to kill anyone?

They suffer for ten minutes; you suffer for the rest of your life.

There were other ways than that.

Despite all her vanity, all her credulity, all her willingness to believe the thing she wished, still at the back of her thoughts in the depth

of her heart, unadmitted, detested, thrust away, there had always been the latent consciousness that the love of Ioris had passed from her and gone to this other woman whom she hated.

A million little traits came back upon her now that might have told her all the truth long before had not her eyes been blinded by the cataract of an immense and undoubting vanity. Out from the limbo of forgotten trivialities there started to her memory, now, a million trifles of glance, of word, of gesture, that should have told her ere the Lenten lilies had been white, that these two had understood each other in tenderest sympathy and comprehension. All these memories now seemed to dart from their hiding-places and shoot little tongues of flame at her like demons at their play. She had been fooled all the while!

To a vain woman what blow so deadly, what offence so beyond all pardon!

She stood like a stupefied creature, the letter in her hand, till the recollection of her world—the world she lived for—came to her.

Though her rage should choke her, and her

hatred strangle her, she must have no scene the world would hear of; no rash, wild vengeance that would level the Temple of All the Virtues with the dust.

Her first impulse was the impulse of every woman that finds herself forsaken for another. Her second instinct was the stronger one of self-interest. Keen, violent, tempestuous as her passions were, one curb lay on them always: the resolve never for them or their indulgence to lose a single advantage, a single practical gain.

To dash his hands away, to strike the lips that had touched another's, to drive him out of her presence under a storm of curses, ay, even to send a trusty blade straight through his breast-bone, these were all her first impulses, fierce, natural, maddened, unthinking. But before her, like a saving spirit to arrest her blows and teach her patience, rose the memory of—Fiordelisa.

To slay Ioris—even to quarrel with him—was to lose Fiordelisa.

Fiordelisa was first; and he but second.

But for Fiordelisa, she would have scourged him from her sight, or have done worse to him;

but Fiordelisa was as a silver chain lying on her rage, and keeping it dumb and still.

The years were waning with her, and in a little while men would cease to find sorcery in her smile. If she exiled herself from Fiordelisa, never would she find such another kingdom, never again would winepress and granary be piled full for her gain, and indolence and negligence drop a sceptre to her grasp—never again.

And she knew it.

Though a woman who deluded herself on many things, she had no delusion here.

'You will never find such another fool,' had her husband said once to her in a moment of candour, and she knew very well that she never would—that Cleopatra though she was, her days with Cæsars were done.

Dearer than all passion, sweeter than all vengeance to her, were her scales and her stockbooks, her ledgers and her leathern purse, her sway on the breezy wild hills, her rule in the ancient grey halls.

Lose Fiordelisa!

Her heart turned sick, her blood ran cold, at the mere thought.

Have another woman reign there in her stead? —a woman who would hold the old oaks sacred, let the songbirds sing, kneel by the old altars, and bid roses bloom, and children laugh, and peasants be free, and the lord of all be lord in truth?

Never, she swore in her soul, never! never, by all the gods of vengeance, would she be thus dethroned and thus displaced.

Sooner would she hurl torches in the granaries and see the flames rise in a hurricane of fire north and south and east and west till Fiordelisa were a blackened waste!

The terror of this peril calmed her.

Ioris she might furiously have released, or as furiously have struck with her clenched hand and cursed and banished. But Fiordelisa never would she risk!

Therefore burn in anguish, chafe in humiliations as she would, she must needs choke herself into silence and give him no pretext of an angry glance, no opening of a furious word, no hint of her knowledge of his infidelity, no power to seize

the liberty that lies in dissension and avowal. She must be silent, let silence cost her what it would.

She sat there in the little darkling room with the taper like a tiny star beside her, and felt that she would sooner lose her life than Fiordelisa.

It was quite night.

Time had fled without her taking any count of its swift passing. No one had dared disturb her. Ioris had not returned.

Prudence, and the chillier self-control begotten of a supreme self-love, ruled her once more. She put the letter back underneath others as she had found it, and gathered up the papers she had come to seek, and blew the taper out, and groped her way to the door.

On the staircase a lamp was burning; his servant hurried out, hearing her.

'I thought milady was gone long ago,' he stammered, wondering.

She controlled her voice to cheerfulness and calm command.

'No, Giannino, your master had left me so much to write; I wish he would do his own

work,' she said, with her usual familiar laugh, and frank curt way. 'Call me some cab, will you; I shall be late home for dinner. Do you know where the Prince is gone?'

Giannino knew very well, but he threw his hands to heaven and swore ignorance.

She went out of the house, and home.

At home she locked herself in her bedchamber and passed the most bitter hour of her life. But when the hour was passed, her resolve was taken.

A weak and tender woman would have broken her heart, a true and impassioned woman would have ruined herself, taking some fleet, fierce revenge to be mourned for with a lifetime of remorse.

She who was always strong and never true, knew better ways than these.

When she heard his laggard step on the stairs and his tired voice in the antechamber, she rose and withdrew the bolts and bade him come to her. When he came she threw her arm about his throat.

'I am feverish and cold, Io; feel my cheeks and my hands. I have been doing too much for

you at Fiordelisa. Where have you been all day?'

And she kissed him.

She felt him shudder.

And again she kissed him; having chosen her vengeance—a vengeance that should not lose for her Fiordelisa.

If she had never known the truth she would have been suspicious, importunate, watchful, jealous, angered, curious, always interrogating and always spying; and Ioris would have grown impatient, and soon or late some bitter word would have unlocked the gates of his secret, and the fetters of his bondage, both at once.

But to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Knowing the truth, and having resolved never to show she knew it, nothing could seem more trustful, no one more unconscious of any rival near her than was she; she seemed completely credulous of all he said, and against her mingled ardour and good faith, devotion and trustfulness his restless consciousness broke itself bitterly in vain, as waves break powerless on a bank of sand. If she had but broken out into rage

once, all would have been said, and he for ever free.

But she kept her temper, like a very Griseldis.

Since the first winter that she had wooed him, he had never known her so tender and so caressing; the harshness of her natural tones was hushed, and the vigilance of her endless espionage was abated. To a woman who suspects you it is easy to say, 'I am faithless;' to a woman who trusts you it is very hard to say it.

She knew this so well. She took heed to let no shadow of a doubt ever seem to hover near her. With the snow white on the streets and plains, she spoke with a smile of their coming summer at Fiordelisa.

Now and then carelessly, as of a thing indifferent alike to both, she spoke of Etoile.

'I am glad she has the conscience not to come near me,' she said one day. 'That shows she knows what my poor father said to me. Does she persecute you, Io, with any more letters?'

'Did I ever say that I was persecuted?' he muttered, as he turned away impatient with himself.

The Lady Joan laughed pleasantly.

'Oh, no, I daresay you felt very complimented; men always do on their *bonnes fortunes*, do they not, Marjory?'

And the Echo was careful to reply.

'Io looks quite vain, *I* think! It is not everybody who fascinates a feminine Raffaelle who can give his features immortality upon canvas!'

'What folly!' said Ioris, with a dark flush on his cheek. Then Lady Joan and the Echo laughed again.

But that was all.

When he was absent, when he was inattentive, when he was intentionally negligent of her summons, and ceased to accompany her in society or to any public place, she was still a very Griseldis in her patience. She even said to him, 'You are right, dear, perhaps to be seen with me less,—people will talk.'

But all the while, with all her patience, she made him feel that she held him closely in a very labyrinth of his own weaving, and she never spoke of any coming day or year, or even distant

hereafter, but what she spoke of it as something they were quite sure to share together.

There was a sort of hateful anodyne in this security of claim that seemed to drug him and hold him motionless and paralysed, as the fell curare holds the victim that it drugs.

Once she said to him tenderly:

'*Caro mio*, I feel quite ashamed when I think that I made you that scene in Paris. With all your devotion to me, to insult you by any idea that you could be untrue to me for five minutes! I quite hate myself, Io; I do, indeed!'

She would say these things in the noise of a street, in the buzz of society, in the midst of the world, so that they gave him no chance of a reply that might have been the prelude to truth and freedom, but only filled him with a sickly sense of all that she expected, all that she would exact, and of how entirely she took for granted that he was hers for ever.

All this cost her very dear; when hate and fury, dread and jealous fear, were seething together in her, and all her veins were on fire with outraged vanity and the consciousness of his

broken faith, to have to keep her fury dumb, to rein in her violence, to caress and smile and be still, and seem to know nothing, and give no vent to anyone of the bitter words that every moment sprang up to her lips; all this cost her very dear. But she had served a long apprenticeship in the world to the art of self-repression; and here she held steadily one great aim in view, and it gave her nerve and patience.

Not to lose Fiordelisa; never to lose Fiordelisa. This was her Alpha and her Omega.

A feebler or a franker woman would have jeopardised all in one hour of reproach or of entreaty. But she knew better than to give him any such loophole for escape. A tempest clears the air: she filled her atmosphere with mist, in which, strive as he would for the light, he should lose his path and be for ever lost. Long, long before, hanging her cashmere up in the loggia of Fiordelisa on the first day of her entrance there, she had known that the wisdom for her in the future must be—immoveability.

That she must never seem to know, to hear, to see, to feel, any sign that he might ever give

that her reign should cease and her steps depart.

To that wisdom she adhered now.

It cost her many bitter hours to cling to it, but it was her sheet anchor and she never let it go. And in her way she was very wise.

Meanwhile Mr. Challoner had returned for Christmas; he never by any chance neglected a domestic festival; the city was full, and teacups and triptychs were in requisition; the mighty cousins were some of them arrived or arriving; the houses that had to be called at were many; Mrs. Grundy and Mrs. Candour were at the head of their serried battalions; and she, as usual, was busy conciliating, propitiating, purchasing, selling, smiling, entreating, investing, ingratiating; yet she looked ill, and grew very thin, and had a feverish, harassed glance in her eyes.

'It is the great grief she has had,' said the Scrope-Stairs.

'It is the superhuman energy she has shown,' said Mr. Silverly Bell; and Society said after them, 'Great grief—great energy—most laudable

—most admirable,' and went still oftener than ever to call on her.

She was supposed to have had a great financial success. People are very fond of such success.

Success like that of Etoile is not popular; it seems to be seated on some inaccessible pinnacle whence it seems to shower pity and scorn on mankind. But a success like the mended pot's, monetary, commonplace, practical, comfortable, that is another thing, everybody likes it, everybody trusts it.

Everybody went to her accordingly, and she had many pleasant little occasions on which to drop a word in Everybody's ear.

'Etoile? Oh, dear no! I never see her, never *wish*. She never comes near me since I saw my poor father. If I thought I should meet her anywhere, I should not go there—No. Well, perhaps not worse than other artists! . . . . I believe she lays nets for Io. He hates her, but he is very weak Poor Io! Fancy anybody making a hero of Io! But to be sure, perhaps I cannot judge myself; he has been like a brother to me so long: poor Io!'

For she was of this complexion, that heaven might have been crashing, and the earth reeling to its doom, but she would have been ready to buy cheap a length of lace, or make a desirable acquaintance. It is of this stout stuff that great characters are always made.

She was really wretched; she was really half mad with rage and pain and terror; in sober truth, waking or sleeping, night or day, the thought of her rival was never absent from her. But all the same she neglected none of all the minutiæ that Society exacts; she ran up the stairs alike of her studios and her drawing-rooms; she went on her rounds of visits with her husband; and she could still rouse herself and calm herself in a hurricane of hysterics if there came the slightest chance of selling a teacup at a profit.

And when Everybody was gone she would lie on her sofa and take some ether, and say to her maid, 'Send for the Prince Ioris, will you, Marianna. Say I am very ill this evening:' when reluctant he obeyed, she would note how cold his glance was, how unwilling his step, how indifferent his voice, and choke the jealous

rage in silence in her heart, and pass her hand over his hair and murmur to him, 'I am so ill to-night; I cannot let you go again; *amor mio*, give me those drops—I am faint.'

He bent his knee beside her, sullen and yet contrite. She looked thin, she looked hectic, she looked worn: he could not doubt her love for him, she grew so gentle.

'Would to heaven she would hate me!' he thought: and hated himself.

But she did not hate him.

True there were times when she could have snatched the silver dagger from her hair, and plunged it in his breast, like any jealousy-maddened fisher-girl on the edge of the waves by Amalfi; true there were hours when, knowing how he had fooled her, how he believed he fooled her still, how laggard was his step, how languid his caress, how dark and averted his glance, she could have rent him limb from limb. True there were moments when even yet the fierce, wild temper in her asserted itself, and she was ready to fling the truth in his face and curse him and let him go.

But in her inmost soul she loved him, in her savage selfish way, more than she had ever done in her life; in her heart she felt a sullen respect for him for having so well deceived her; and the sense that his love was gone to another sharpened the passion in her to new keenness, gave it a new birth, a new lease of life, fresh vigour and fresh tenacity. She had grown careless of him, being so very sure he was her toy for life; but now that she knew how slender was her hold, and how at every hour it might snap, she strained every nerve to hold him. Vengeance she would have; but it should be such vengeance as should fetter him for ever and not cast him free.

For in her way she was very wise.

And she lay on her sofa, and took her ether and her morphia, and sent for him, and wound her fingers close about his wrist, and said, 'You must not leave me, dear: yes, I feel faint and ill. I shall be strong again with the spring—at our dear Fiordelisa.'

CHAPTER XLV.

'ONE of the women that forgive,' he had said of Etoile.

What woman is not of these that loves truly?

She forgave from the depths of her soul, though shuddering she turned from the memory of what it was that she forgave. She forgave, even as he had justly said she would have kissed his hand if it had stabbed her. But even as, had she been stabbed by him, the dulness of death would have come to her through him, so now a great dread and a great humiliation weighed on her and would not pass away.

'You have let her come back, not knowing the truth?' she said to him; and when he could

but answer her 'Yes,' with averted eyes and a flush on his olive cheek, she felt a great sense of hopelessness fall upon her.

She was not angered; she did not upbraid him. These are the selfish ways of little and vain natures. She loved him so much that she shut her lips over all reproach or rebuke. But she began to comprehend that his will was much as are the reeds by the river, and his promise unstable as the winds that wander amidst the reeds; and this was more terrible to her than any peril of circumstance could have been. Against circumstance, the strong nature will rise dauntless and unwearied, however long or painful be the conflict; but against the woes that spring from character, the bravest is powerless. No one can alter nature.

Dully and slowly Etoile awoke to the consciousness that when she had thought that she loosened the toils from about his feet, she had but wound them about herself as well.

He soothed her with tender words. He reassured her with earnest promise. He begged of her only to have patience a little while longer,

and said that all would be well. She listened and obeyed, fearing to rouse the mysteries and dangers that seemed to lie about his path. She did not understand, therefore she was afraid to move. On one thing only was she resolute.

'If I see her——' she said, with a shudder, to him, 'If I see her—which I pray heaven to spare me—I cannot speak to her, or look at her; she must think of me what she will.'

'Surely: would I ask you to know her now?' he answered; and he did feel that not for an empire would he have the hands of these women meet; and Etoile would not have been what he loved if she could have smiled upon her foe and his destroyer.

Yet in his heart, though he hated himself for the transient emotion, he felt a momentary impatience, a momentary wish that she were of lighter temper like others, and took things less deeply. He had been used to a world in which the wife smiled on her husband's mistress; the husband on the man that dishonoured him; the bitterest foes were the best friends in seeming, and the rivalry, the intrigue, the crime, the en-

mity of the hour, were all alike concealed beneath a surface of courtesy and cordiality, and the friendship of society was but a mask for lusts, for treachery, for hatreds. He loved her because she was not like this world; yet habit and usage made him for an instant wish that she would stoop to its convenient hypocrisies, its bland untruths.

'What would it cost her to be ostensibly friends with her rival for a few brief weeks till I am free?' he thought; and then he repented of the thought, and felt that it was unworthy both of himself and her. And how did he mean to take his freedom? He did not know. He drifted; trusting to chance. He had lost his opportunity. Opportunity is our good angel, but if when it knocks we do not open quickly, it goes away from us, rarely to return. He was in the mist and twilight of a great dilemma, and as one little cloud spreads all over the heavens till the earth is dark with storm, so one hesitating and timid untruth spreads into a night of falsehood, a shipwreck of life and love.

Etoile, who all her life had been strong because she had been aloof from mankind and in-

different to human pains and joys, and wrapped in the lofty egotisms of the arts, Etoile was now weak as the weakest; every woman is so that loves greatly. In a great love, the eyes are blinded, the lips closed, the ears deaf, the will paralysed; only beholding, only breathing for, only hearing, only obeying, one other life out of all the millions upon earth: and nothing short of this is love.

She was weak, and weakness is ever unwise. She shrank from any chance of meeting the woman whom it made her burn with shame to think was still her rival. She shrank from any obligation of going into the routine of society, and greeting, or passing by, as some mere acquaintance the lover who was all the world to her. All the trivial untruths, the conventional masquerades that society regards as venial, indeed as right and wise, were to her cowardly and guilty evasions; she could not stoop to them. She would keep silence since he wished it; she would bear pain if it pleased him to lay it on her; she would even submit to injurious construction and slanderous comment if it came to her through obedience to his will. But she would not act a

social lie; therefore she shut her doors on the world and would not go out to it, and let it babble what it might of her.

She was very happy still, very often; she believed that he scarcely saw her rival; she was full of faith in his words and in her future. She withdrew into solitude, because solitude was sweeter to her than any companionship when he was absent. She prayed for him, she smiled on him often when she could have wept; in his absence she gave herself to art for his sake, that he might still be proud of her.

Alas! prayer was of no avail; nor tenderness, nor love, nor any delicacy or constancy of faith. To save him she needed to have been of coarser fibre, of colder heart, of tougher mould; she needed to have been blunt and fierce and subtle and resolute like her foe.

Ariel could not combat a leopardess; Ithuriel's spear glances pointless from a rhinoceros' hide. To match what is low and beat it, you must stoop; and soil your hands to cut a cudgel rough and ready. She did not see this; and seeing it, would not have lowered herself to do it.

She withdrew herself into solitude, and loved him as one woman perhaps loves once in a century. It seemed to her that it was all that she could do; that it must be enough, since he loved her.

But it was not enough; because he was not alone; restless, ruthless, ever-present, avaricious of every moment, unscrupulous in every guile, fierce as a driving sirocco, and penetrating everywhere like the sirocco's sand, her rival was for ever beside him.

If she had gone down into the mud of the arena and fought with the same weapon as her foe, she would have vanquished; but pride held her back, and love, and faith, which would not insult him: she stayed aloof and could not struggle with what was base basely.

So the day of battle waned and went against her.

The same crowd on the Pincio spoke of her that had spoken the year before, only with interest less lively because she was no more a novelty.

'She is always in Rome?'

'Yes, at Rocaldi.'

'What does she do at Rocaldi?'

'Humph—well—ah! . . . . '

Then people laughed, no one knew very well why.

'Does she send to the Salon this year?'

'Nothing.'

'Is she ill?'

'Nobody knows.'

'One sees her driving?'

'Oh, yes, you may see her driving.'

'Not in society?'

'Not in society this year.'

'Very odd.'

'Such women are always odd.'

'She seems to shut herself up like a nun; perhaps the big dog is a man in disguise.'

Then everybody laughed again, and thought they were witty.

On such a congenial temper of society, and into minds so well prepared, the voice of her foe and its echoes easily dropped well-chosen words.

Lady Joan was in mourning and could not go

out in the evening, but she called upon people assiduously and received them at home on her Wednesdays, there being nothing in tea and talk against woe.

'So sorry you should ever have been exposed to meeting her here,' she said, with cordial apology and a sad tone in her voice; 'so very, very sorry. But my poor dear father's name was used without his knowledge; his very last words to me almost were in anger about her; oh, for myself I do not mind; I am not prudish; but for all my dear friends who met her here—I feel I cannot make atonement enough.'

Then she would smile a little and add: 'It is so tiresome for poor Io; she has taken such a fancy for him, and now that she does not come here she never sees him of course, and she is always teasing him—sending after him. He never goes indeed, but still to a man of delicate mind like Io it is painful—yes, artists are always very strange; it is a great pity.'

And she would look very frank and very sorrowful, and her echoes would say the same thing a little more faintly, but very faithfully,

till Society was all one big echo, singing the same song, like the rocks round a lake.

Mr. Silverly Bell, like the famous Hibernian echo which embroiders variations, would add—'The generous hospitality of Lady Joan so abused! Her noble friendship so slandered! So sad, so shocking, so shameful! No, I have no idea who pays for Rocaldi. Not its tenant—certainly not its tenant. She sends nothing to the Salon this year. Poor Ioris! It all annoys him unspeakably. He never saw her save in the Casa Challoner—never!'

This was what Etoile had done by leaving the field to her foes, whilst scornful of the tongues of the world, and always indifferent to their blame as to their praise, she lived on in her solitude, counting the hours till they brought Ioris. He told her that he scarcely saw her rival; never save when the complications of their entangled affairs made it unavoidable. To doubt him was very difficult to her. To watch him was impossible.

Out of an exaggerated sense of the honour due to him she would never utter his name to others; never pass down a street where it could seem as if

she watched him; never take any means, not the most innocent, to ascertain whether what he said were true or false. He loved her, and that was enough. He was master of both their fates.

'So you have withdrawn yourself to your rock in the middle of the sea, or rather in the middle of your vineyards,' said Lady Cardiff to her one day, with approval in her phrases, but vexation in her soul. 'Well, no doubt you are very wise, my dear. Every one to his taste. Perhaps it is better to drop society altogether unless you conform to it altogether, and make it pleasant to you by being pleasant to itself, painting your eyebrows, tittle-tattling, wearing your gowns half way down your spine, finding an H.R.H.'s impudence honour, kissing your worst enemy, being prettily fickle and smilingly false, and making yourself generally placable and affable. As you will not do that, perhaps the rock in the middle of the sea—or the vines—is best for you, as his skylight was for Victor Hugo. I am sure I dare not say it isn't. Only it does seem a pity, at your age, with your talents, to shut yourself up in a sort of Paraclête

with a lot of palm-trees. It does seem a pity. To be sure, there is Tsar.'

'There is always Tsar,' said Etoile, with a smile.

'And Ioris,' thought Lady Cardiff, with impatience and discontent.

'Ioris embellishes a Paraclête, no doubt,' she mused to herself. 'But she is making a terrible error. She loves with the immortal love of the poets, and he with the trivial passion of the world. I am sure of it, as sure as if they were both before me. And what is the use of secluding herself under her palm-trees? Seclusion will not beat that bully who owns him. On the contrary, she should be always in the world, always taking away her foe's friends, countermining her foe's mines, shining, succeeding, giving her lover hosts of rivals to fear, showing him always her own power, her own triumph, her own caprices. That is the way that rivals are beaten, and men are retained. But she does not see it. If she did see it, she would not do it. She will wait under her palms for him to come to her. Whenever he ceases to come, then she will break her heart and

live alone till she dies. I always used to wonder how Heloise, with all her sense and knowledge and genius, and Greek and Latin, ever could let Abelard beat her. I don't wonder since I have known Etoile. I am quite sure Ioris beats her —metaphorically speaking—just because he has been so tired of being beaten himself. Ah, dear me! why couldn't the fates have been kinder and have left that other woman on her housetop in Damascus!'

But Lady Cardiff was a *grande dame* and a wise person, too high-bred to speak of what did not concern her, so she thought all this only in vexed silence, and merely said with a pleasant smile—

'To be sure there is always Tsar.'

Tsar, who at that moment was tossing in play, in the air over his head, a man's glove—a glove that belonged to the slender, soft, long hand of Ioris.

Lady Cardiff saw that it was a man's glove, but she said nothing.

'You have heard of my poor friend; of Dorotea?' said Etoile hurriedly, to alter the subject.

'Yes; I have heard.'

'Is not the world bitterly cruel? Can there be a viler sentence—a more hideous injustice?'

'Perhaps the one the world will pass on you will be as much so,' thought Lady Cardiff, as she answered aloud: 'You hear nothing from herself?'

'Nothing—now—for many months.'

'But you believe in her innocence?'

'As I believe that the sun shines in the heavens.'

'Dear me! Yet she is worse than dead?'

'Worse than dead!'

The tears rolled down the cheeks of Etoile as she spoke, and she turned away. Life, from one lovely, classic, cold vision of all the arts, had changed and become to her a thing so exquisitely beautiful, so fearfully terrible, that she grew dizzy in its midst.

Lady Cardiff glanced at her, and said aloud pleasantly—

'My dear, Tsar will tear that glove. Is it yours?'

'It is Ireneo's. He spoils Tsar very much,' said Etoile unthinkingly, and then she grew a

little pale, being afraid that she had betrayed the secret of her lover.

'Ioris? Ah! he is very fond of dogs. Lady Joan beats them,' said Lady Cardiff tranquilly.

The colour burned in the face of Etoile. She was silent.

'After all,' mused Lady Cardiff, 'Paraclête is more like common humanity than one thought. That is a comfort.'

But a vague apprehension was upon her, and she went away; once more too engrossed and too pained to care to read her *Figaro*, which was the effect that her visits to what she called Paraclête always produced on her.

The *Figaro* was equally interesting and veracious that day. It contained, like many other journals of Europe at that epoch, the full account of the suit of the Duc de Santorin against his wife, known to the world as Dorotea Coronis—a suit in which the husband was completely triumphant, with a triumph chiefly due to the letters of a dead lover that he placed before the judge.

'Why *will* people write letters?' said Lady Cardiff to herself, with a tender pity for human

nature. 'Were there any entanglements before people took to letter-writing? I don't think there can have been. Every bother and show-up that we have, come out of letters now-a-days. How nice and safe it must have been with only flowers for correspondence, as they had in the East before we civilised it. If a marigold or a clove-pink had been found, and meant anything dreadful, you could always have said it was a mistake of the gardener's. Santorin himself couldn't have taken a marigold or a clove-pink into court.'

She drove on to the Pincio and got out and walked, and found every one talking of the Santorin suit, and full of sympathy for the husband.

'She would never sing a note after the Russian died. *That* was proof of guilt enough!' said lovely Mrs. Desart.

'And she is gone into a convent in Spain,' added Lady Eyebright.

'She should have gone there before,' said Mrs. Desart.

'Why do convents open their doors to such women?' said Lady Joan Challoner severely.

'But the letters were no proof of her infidelity,' said a man who thought with a pang of that fairest face and that loveliest voice veiled and dumb in a living grave. 'The letters clearly reproached her with cruelty, with coldness. I cannot see myself——'

'There were the plainest possible proofs of criminal intercourse,' said Lady Joan and Mrs. Desart and Lady Eyebright together. 'The letters proved it, and if they did not, the servants' testimony did——'

'A maid she had discharged and a valet of Santorin's! The old Spanish woman swore to her utter innocence——'

'The old Spaniard was in her dotage: the judge said so. Besides, the Russian was not the *first*——'

'Oh, mesdames!——'

'She was a most profligate creature. To think she should have so often sung to our Queen!——'

Lady Cardiff put her glass in her eye:—

'She wasn't divorced then, my dear Lady Joan. Anybody adorned with the Scarlet Letter that is not a *divorcée* may come to Court, so I

suppose they may sing at it. It is the Victorian rule. It has many conveniences—'

Lady Joan winced, but was stern in her justice.

'It serves Santorin right for marrying a person out of the mud like that,' she said still severely. 'What could he expect? Artists are always the same. And it will be so hard upon him now. He won't be able to marry unless she dies.'

'You think it hard on men not to be able to marry? How nice of you! But then all marriages are not as happy as yours, dear Lady Joan,' said Lady Cardiff, and she turned to Mr. Challoner.

'Santorin takes two millions from her under his marriage contract. Rather bathos, that, don't you think? If Menelaus had taken two millions from Helen, would Greece have sympathised? One doesn't know. Morals alter so, and manners. Ours seems a lucrative age for husbands, doesn't it? If she could have gone on singing and paying his debts, I am sure he would never have brought his suit. No?'

Mrs. Challoner reddened, and said something

vague about no payment of debts compensating any gentleman for dishonour.

Lady Cardiff went onward meditatively.

'Dear, dear!' she thought to herself, 'that singing-woman is dying in a convent, and our feminine Raffaelle leaning on a reed that will pierce her heart like a spear some day! Dear, dear! what *is* the use of being born with the Muse in you if you cannot take better care of yourself than that? The woman was innocent—yes, certainly innocent; the letters prove, if they prove anything, how she strove against her love for her lover's sake; and yet if she were singing anywhere, virtuous women like Lady Joan and the Desart could not hear her, and the very theatres would be scandalised, and very likely hiss! What an admirable century! Royal courts are severe as Rhadamanthus on the morals of the few that sing at a state concert; the twelve hundred that come to listen may have sinned as they liked; that don't hurt a Court at all!'

Left alone, Etoile paced restlessly to and fro the long terrace on which the dog had been at play with the glove.

The fate of her friend Dorotea had filled her with pain and indignation, though she had heard nothing more than what the world knew, for since the moment that she had been told of Fédor Souroff's death, Dorotea Coronis had died herself to the world: all ties and memories of living things or living friends had perished from her. But to Etoile also had come that supreme absorption of love in which other affections perish, and nothing in the wide world seems to matter so that one life lives and is near. She understood now Dorotea Coronis as she had not understood her on her first night in Rome: that was all.

The world often rails at this isolation and absorption of passion as an egotism, but it is in truth its highest sublimity.

Love that remembers aught save the one beloved, may be affection, but it is not love.

The name uttered before her in union with her lover's had cut to her very soul.

It was to avoid this pain, this humiliation, this bitterness which she could not resent, that she had shut herself in loneliness here, letting

the world that liked to chatter of her give what motive it would to her solitude.

Was it possible that in that world they still deemed him her rival's?

Her cheeks burned, her pulse throbbed high, as she paced to and fro in the late, chilly day. How long was it to last, this secrecy, this silence, this mystery! She was everything to him, and she seemed to be nothing.

She had accepted this position because it was of his doing and his choice, but she had been always impatient of it. To the woman whose courage had been contemptuous and daring to a fault, no sacrifice could have been so hard as this demand to bear with a cowardice and mask a truth.

She had been shut in her solitude till she had forgotten how the world went on; she remembered it with a shudder now.

Was it possible that in the world he still passed as the lover of another?

No: he was hers. That was enough.

She would not wrong him with a doubt. He had told her such doubt was insult.

So she paced her lonely terraces in the red wintry afternoon, and trusted him, and when his step was heard and his hand touched hers, asked nothing more of him or heaven.

'When I am not there, she is alone and dreams of me,' Ioris said to himself, and that knowledge made him careless.

If her nature would have let her do so, it would have been wiser to have had her painting room full of worshippers and her hours full of pleasures and ambitions; he would have been insecure and anxious to keep his power, and would have hastened to cry to all others, 'Stand off—she is mine!'

For men are made so.

Moreover the complexities and contradictions of his own nature were at war. He liked the very peril of his path; he was glad once more to steal unseen by moonlight to a tryst that none could know. Long obliged to pass through a crowd under a blare of trumpets to a mistress who loved her vanity far more than he, this silence and this solitude was precious to him. Silence and solitude are the twin divinities of love that guard its portals while it dreams; but the Lady Joan had

detested them: like the old sovereigns of Rome she thought no victory of worth without its triumph moving down the public ways. He had been bound so long behind her chariot, jaded and impatient of the throngs that jeered, that the sweet sense of imperious mastery both of the woman he loved, and of the secret of his love, came to him with the delight of variety, the charm of power. Etoile had seemed to him at first like Del Sarto's Sebastian, with the palm and arrow, and uplifted eyes, looking for higher things than earth can give. It was sweet to him to bend the palm and break the arrow and make the eyes sink earthward and see only his.

In all the feverish pangs of love there is none sharper than that with which the woman, who is loved in secret, sees the life that is her own passing in the crowd of the world amidst other women, aloof from her, as a friend, as a stranger, whilst she must hold her silence, and give and take from him the empty phrases of ceremonial and custom; for a little while it is sweet, that contrast between solitude and society; that soft, secret tie; that tender complicity undreamed

of by others; for awhile it is very sweet, but afterwards it grows into a fretting pain and brings a sense of galling bitterness.

To Etoile the pain of it was doubly galling, because in all her life she had never stooped to seem the thing she was not.

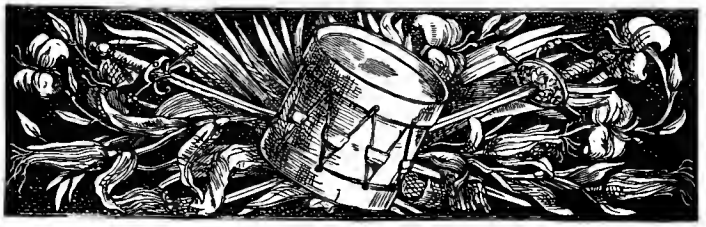
'Love loses its loveliness made public; it is like the grapes, once handled, the bloom is gone,' he said to her, seeking to reconcile her; and it was a truth, but only true of love that does not speak to any, out of supreme indifference to all except itself; not true of love that dares not avow itself, and tells a lie.

At other times he said to her, 'Wait, dear, wait but a very little more; then all the world shall know that I—such as I am, and most unworthy—am all yours.'

And she loved him so well that the mere sound of his voice—say what sophistry it would—was her paradise.

'She is nothing to you?' she murmured to him that day, and hid her face on his breast as she asked it, because the question hurt her and seemed to her shameful.

'Do you dishonour me with the doubt?' he said petulantly and with anger; and she asked his forgiveness. She was not wise now, nor strong: she only loved him very greatly.



CHAPTER XLVI.

'HAVE I chosen the right way?' the Lady Joan asked herself again and again, with rage and fear at her heart.

She knew all that he did with his time now, being once on the trace of his trespass; she knew the hours that he passed with her rival; she knew the way in which he spent evenings for which he accounted to herself with a thousand specious excuses. When these excuses were palmed off on her, she, knowing the truth, felt at times as if she must strike him dead; but she held her peace staunchly, and smiled, and accepted what he said. Was it the right way? Sometimes she doubted, sometimes a spasm of dread seized her; but she

knew men and their weaknesses and their impulses; her experience told her that there was no other way half so sure. So she wore her mask.

It was an iron mask, and hurt her; but she wore it staunchly, never loosening it, however great the strain. She never let it drop before any living creature, not even before plump Mimo, from whom she had no secrets; not even before her watchdog who had put her on the trail.

'I cannot forgive myself for ever introducing poor Io to Etoile; she will end in entangling him; she is clever and he is so weak,' she would say to the former; and to the latter add, with a smile, 'Io comes to me every day to complain of that woman, and her passion for him. I laugh at him for being so fatally attractive. It does seem so absurd to *us*, dear—doesn't it?—that anybody can see a hero in Io! Of course we are all of us fond of him; but Io will never set the Thames or the Tiber on fire.'

Marjory Scrope could only listen, and feel a thrill of envious wonder at her friend's coolness and skill. She herself could not wear a mask like that; she could only feebly imitate her

greater leader, and murmur in turn to Society: 'Oh, no, we never see her now; we do not feel we could; we have heard so very much. . . . . They say, too, that she pretends there is something wrong between our good dear friend and Ioris. As if *we* did not know! as if anybody could know as *we* do! So absurd, you know; so cruel; so like a woman who errs herself, and judges everyone by her own errors. Oh, no, indeed, you need never fear meeting her at our house; we never see her now; we should not receive her.'

So the three sisters brewed the sulphur fumes in their cauldron, and in that cauldron, as also in the Temple of All the Virtues, the name of Etoile was daily sacrificed as a votive offering to the kind gods of Calumny; those gracious and just gods who never frown when their priests are pleased or when the baked meats are plenteous.

And Silverly Bell would shake his head, which he always found more effective than words; shake his head and sigh profoundly.

Society understood that the sigh meant all kinds of unmentionable sin.

Of a woman who had ceased to receive, as Etoile had done, who dwelt aloof from the world, and made it feel that it was less to her than the grasses under her feet in the fields, Society was always ready to believe anything.

'Oh, you noble imbecile! Oh, you noble but most absolute imbecile!' thought Lady Cardiff, in a futile frenzy of irritation at the seclusion of Etoile. 'Why don't you understand; why won't you understand? Have twenty lovers, and nobody'll say anything; but to have *one!* . . . . It is a standing insolence to all the rest of our sex. If you *must* have only one, and if that one must be some one else's perjured Launcelot, there is only one way for you to get yourself and Launcelot pardoned, and to beat black-browed Guinevere out of the field and be victorious—only one way: throw open your house, give dinners, go out everywhere, smile on everybody, be *en évidence* every day; make Guinevere look a disagreeable, stingy, and shabby nobody beside you; then the world will go with you, most likely, and never ask if you have only one lover or have twenty. But to shut yourself up,

and merely live for perjured Launcelot, and when he is absent model clay, and paint on panels, what can the world of women make of you when you do this? You belong to *lusus naturæ*, *feræ naturæ*—unlike everything and everybody. Of course they will stone you, as village bumpkins run out and stone an odd stray bird that they have never seen before; and the more beautiful the plumage looks, the harder rain the stones. If the bird were a sparrow the bumpkins would let it be.'

But Lady Cardiff could only think her thoughts, not utter them, being too high-bred to interfere in anyone's destiny unasked, and could only say, when she heard the stones pelting in Society:—

'Etoile? Oh, dear, yes; of course I know her; of course I go to her. Why not? Everybody did go last year; I should go if nobody did. It is very uncommon, you know, to see a woman who paints everything except her face, and who thinks Milton and Sophocles better company than ourselves. Odd? Yes, very odd; that I grant, but interesting. An adventuress, is she? Ah, I

didn't know it. Does it matter? I thought she was a great artist. I may be mistaken. I am *not* mistaken? Then why an adventuress? I do not quite understand. Same thing, is it?'

And then Society winced under Lady Cardiff's eyeglass and her courtly smile; and, feeling that it looked foolish to her, felt so.

But one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one friend, or fifty, suffice to stem the tide of enmity that is popular. The world, as a rule, was always angered with a woman whom it had crowned, and who did not care for it; who valued a dead poet or a living daffodil more highly than itself; and who shut herself in a solitude that looked scornful, with her marbles and her canvas. When it found a weakness in her it shouted with joy and rained its stones. It was sweet as the rotten apples in Schiller's desk to the vulgar.

Her foe knew how to hold up rotten apples in the light and vow she found them on her. The world believed. The world, being made up of human beings, is very human; it believes what it likes to believe.

Ioris knew it; it angered him, but he let the sulphur fumes rise and the echoes ring.

'It is always so with what they envy,' he said to himself, and it seemed to him that she was more his own—thus isolated.

What were such calumnies? A rain of arrows that would be borne for his sake, as Sebastian bore them for the sake of heaven.

'I am enough for her,' he said; and, when his conscience smote him, thought, 'It will be all clear some day when they know all; she does not heed it; she is not like other women; the world is nothing to her. I am all.'

Besides, the worst he did not know; for the voice that raised the echoes from the rocks was careful to call its worst in a language that was unfamiliar to him. Past his ear when it was strained to listen, the voice of the Lady Joan went down the wind calling aloud on Calumny, but always calling in English; and Calumny that looked the other way when she herself was sinning, and went by like a meek dog, mute, leaped up like a mastiff at her call, and came foaming at the mouth.

For Lady Joan was a great administrator, and could manage even Calumny: it never bit her, and, when she wished it, flew on any foe she had.

The close of Carnival came, and the revels of the Veglione with it—the Veglione for so many years so dear to the soul of the Lady Joan, with its noise and glare, its malice and mischief, its shrieks and suppers, its travesty of mirth, its blasphemies of love.

It was a bitterly cold night, and Ioris shivered as he left Etoile when the twelfth hour struck and went out into the frosty air.

'I have masses of correspondence to look into and answer by dawn,' he murmured as he kissed her, and left her there, amidst her palms and ferns, her bronzes and casts, her unfinished work in clay and on canvas.

Then, with reluctant step and sinking heart, he went down into the heart of the city, to the gaslit and crowded vestibule of the Apollo, thronging with black dominoes and many-coloured masquers, and up the stairs of the theatre to the ball that he had gone to, year after year, on such nights as these, and, opening the door of it, saw shining

eyes through a vizard of satin, and heard a voice shout with malicious glee:—

'Take me downstairs, Io, quickly! I have changed my rosette; not a soul will know me.'

He gave her his arm sullenly and silently. His thoughts were back in the silent shadowy chambers where another woman, in the pale light of her oil lamps, was putting the last touch to his own bust in marble.

'Thus you seem always with me,' had said Etoile as they had parted; and he had left her and had come to the opera-ball.

He descended to the tumult and turmoil, to the fumes of the wine and the smoke, to the screcching and whooping of masks—to the old, worn-out, stale, stupid roystering.

His companion's hand clutched his arm tightly; her voice pierced his ear as she hissed her innuendoes to others, or screamed the shrill whoop of the place. Year after year they had passed through the same things. He was sick of it, he loathed it, and loathed himself for coming to it; but Lady Joan was triumphant.

She knew whence he had come; and she said

once to him, 'Poor dear Io! your head aches? That comes of sitting all alone all your evening over those tiresome papers.' He muttered a vague assent, and did not notice the glance, like the flash of sharp steel, that darted at him from the eyeholes of her mask.

As he walked, deafened and weary and answering mechanically all those who challenged or laughed, he was wondering to himself why he had not had the courage to tell her the truth that night in the old garden-paths of Fiordelisa—wondering why he had not the courage now.

No one knew that she was here save her tried friends Mimo and Guido, who were very sure to keep her secret. The world supposed her still deep in crape and sorrow, safe in seclusion; and Mr. Challoner, who for once might not have condoned so great an offence to Society, was for the moment in Venice on affairs connected with his shepherd's crook and flock.

This was the sort of merry *scappata* in which her most happy temperament rejoiced, and gambolled as gambols a young goat.

When she was tired of the boards below and

of the yelling throng and went upstairs to her niche in the third circle, she was in the highest spirits, or at least appeared so. There were none who knew her but her old friends. She ate her *caviare* with a relish, and cried aloud:—

'Didn't you know that black domino that leaned against this door, Io? Oh, for shame! I did. It was your Corinna—Etoile!'

Ioris grew very pale: he knew it was a lie, but the lie infuriated him.

'*She* here!' he said, bitterly. 'What are you dreaming of? That she is like yourself?'

She controlled her rage with the wonderful strength that self-interest and self-mastery had given her even in her wildest fury. She laughed aloud.

'My dear Io, take care what you say; she may poignard us going out. Give me a sandwich. Etoile most certainly: why not? Come to watch you! You cannot be adored by a Corinna without being bored by it. Isn't she a Corinna? Wasn't Corinna a Muse no better than she should be? Guido, let us drink to the Tenth Muse, who is not like me; the Tenth Muse who adores Io,

and who is watching at the door with a dagger, I daresay!'

And she laughed and emptied her glass. Ioris sat silent, his arms folded, his head bent.

There were the other men present; he could not speak; it seemed to him like profanation to even defend the woman who was absent in such a place as this.

He saw nothing of the scene before him—of the black mask, the glittering eyes, the glare of gas; he saw Etoile, in the white serge of her working dress, with the drooping fronds of the ferns behind her, and her hand on the marble moulded in his likeness.

On the morrow Lady Joan said to her friends, with a frank regret in her voice—

'Those men that went to the Veglione last night tell me that Etoile was there, actually there, and following Ioris everywhere. Poor Io! who only went because, as one of the club, he was obliged to entertain. I feel such pain, I really do, that an accidental rencontre with her in our house should have brought about such a nuisance and scandal. And Io is such a gentleman, you

know: all the old chivalrous ideas of honour; he will not even allow that she is to blame, though it is quite too annoying for him. What a horrid noise, by the way, all those masquers made going home! I could not sleep the least all night for them—could you?'

On the morrow, Ioris, with his eyes heavy and his head hot from the stupid noisy tumult of the night, went and found Etoile as he most cared to think of her, in her white working dress, in her studio, amidst the marbles and the panels.

She looked to him, as compared with that other, like one of her own cool, pale roses, beside a tumbled gas-lit red camellia.

He sighed as he looked.

She put her arms about his throat.

'What is there to make you sigh? Tell me. If you would only trust me— quite!'

'I do trust you—entirely. I was only thinking what gross and foolish beasts men are, and that to be loved by you one ought to be (as a friend of yours once said) Petrarca at the least.'

'I do not want Petrarca: I want only you.'

'You have me, my angel: such as I am.'

She looked in his eyes with a hesitating fear.

'Wholly—always? Are you sure?'

'Wholly and always.'

And he kissed her.

'That other is my weariness, my bane, my care,' he thought. 'No more. That is truth before heaven. No more.'

No more! But to be that is so much.

It is to be as the lichen on the tree, as the rust on the steel, as the canker in the plant, as the mildew in the air. It is to penetrate, to weaken, to obscure, to entangle, to destroy, invisibly, imperceptibly, but certainly with the certainty of death.

Travellers in Western forests of virgin lands tell how strange and sad a sight it is to see a tall and stately tree, in all its pride of leaf and crown of blossoms, striving in vain to stretch upward to air and light under the clasping, strangling masses of its parasite creepers, that climb aloft on it and stifle it, till it becomes no more than a mere leafless shaft, borne down by what caresses it.

Whoever looks on a man's life strangled under

the parasite of a worn-out yet persistent passion sees the same sorrowful sight as the wanderer in the Western wilds. The death of the tree in the forest is like the moral death of the man who is held by what he knows to be base. The tree strains upward, pines for fresh air, and struggles beneath the enervating and paralysing thing it nourishes, but all in vain. The poisonous parasite is the stronger.

The days and the weeks went on now, and he was not free, though the woman he loved and deceived believed him to be so.

He thought that he did not deceive her, because that other was to him, as he said, only his weariness, his bane, his ruin; because each touch of her rough hand had grown hurtful to him; because each glitter of her watchful eyes made him nervous and restless; because he only bore with her as a man may bear with an adder about his wrist, because he fears its mortal bite if he stir it.

'I am yours only,' he said to Etoile, and deemed it no falsehood, because all that there was in him of heart, and mind, and soul, and tenderness, and passion—all were hers; and to that

other he rendered only such sullen counterfeit of unwilling and unreal emotions as were wrung from him by her insistance and his hesitation. A passive obedience counts not as loyal service. A forced assent means nothing.

So he told himself and bade his conscience be still when, with a heavy sense of guilt, he sat beside his tyrant, and heard her speak of future summers in his old home together, and bent his reluctant head to the ardours of her greeting or her lingering 'Good-night.'

Looking back over the waste of years since she had crossed his path, he saw them strewn with lost time, lost talents, lost hopes, lost honour, lost fortune—all lost by her or through her, and gone for evermore. Yet she was like the adder on the wrist, the parasite on the palm: he dared not stir, he could not reach the light of heaven. She saw that well enough: she was no longer blind. But she only drew closer round him, as the adder round the wrist, as the creeper round the tree.

For her passions might be weak, but she was strong.

The earth was once more sweet with the honey-smell of the golden tulips in the springing corn, and the darkness of the bay and the laurel were starred all over with little white blossoms, and springtime was here.

Lady Joan sat alone in her Turkish room.

It was dusky and heavy with the smell of stale smoke; the flowers brought there faded in it. She did not care for the honey-smell of those cups of a gold she could not coin, and she only liked the bay and the laurel because their berries fattened the blackbirds for the market-stall.

It simplifies life not to be a poet.

She sat in the Turkish room all alone, and her face was dark, her eyes were clouded, her teeth were clenched. She knew how he spent the hours absent from her, and he was absent now. She was Argus-eyed, and had as many ears as Vishnu. She saw, heard, understood, all that moved him, all that he concealed. She had borne it long and with the stern patience that only the consciousness of a great aim could give. She meant to have vengeance and Fiordelisa—both

the two sides of the shield that should hang up in the halls of her triumph.

She sat in the darkened room, and thought; she was alone, and she knew where he was. It seemed to her as if her patience would burst its bonds, her vengeance outstrip her wisdom, her heart break from her bosom: yet she was strong to keep silence. Until he spoke she would not speak.

Time does so much and fate works so well for those who know how to wait ere they strike.

The rumble from the streets filled her ears; stray lines of sunshine shone in through the dusk of the room; she thought of him there, at the feet of Etoile, under the green palms where the nightingales sang at eventide . . . . . All these months he had fooled her thus!

In her black garb, with a silver dagger run through her dusky braids, with her stern lips close shut, and her eyes dark and stormy as a tempestuous midnight, she looked a woman to take a vengeance that should have rung through Europe: to strike one blow, and see her lover dead, then sheathe the dagger in her breast.

She looked so; as she sat, her clenched hand resting on a steel cuirass of old armour that lay near; her own namesake of D'Arc had not had more bitter purpose on her brows; a Cleopatra infuriated had not had more foiled fierce passion in her gloomy eyes.

Alas! the age is an age of prose, and she was in unison with her age.

The old armour but lay there to be sold to a collector expected on the morrow, and she, instead of wrenching the dagger from her hair, took out some letters.

'That will do,' she muttered, much as Iago said, ''twill serve.'

In the many vicissitudes of her adventurous years she had made many friends; she had made one in especial very useful to her. He was only a little common attorney, but he was a very clever little attorney; not at law, of which he had left the public pursuit, though he kept its wisdom packed up in his brain, but in speculation—vague and gorgeous speculation in distant unseen places, in Southern or Western waters, whence it was easy to return, with silver mines, and diamond fields,

and lodes of lead, and stories of savage princes with squalid palaces, but with generous souls; a quite invaluable little attorney: always running out above all to the Coral Isles that lie in the glow of the setting sun in the pellucid seas of the peaceful Pacific, and running back again with romantic Marco Polo stories, and producing any kind of prospectus to suit the money marts and 'changes of all countries—a little attorney that she corresponded with, caressed, petted, almost loved, because he was so useful to her, and called Theodore, with that pleasant touch of intimate friendship which had characterised her since the earliest days when all mankind first became her 'brothers' under the shadow of Mount Lebanon.

Her letters were from Theodore.

He was not in the Coral Isles in the pellucid seas, but in the office that knew her so well in the foggy courts of the City of London. He had brought a gigantic enterprise from the Coral Isles—an enterprise that was only as yet an idea, as even a leviathan at the commencement of its existence is an embryo.

Lady Joan loved ideas—when other people took them for facts.

The idea was to run railways through all the Coral Isles, and steamers between them; at least, not indeed to run them, because Theodore did not much think they would ever be made, but to obtain the concession for making them, which is all to which sensible people ever commit themselves. Theodore had peculiar advantages in the Coral Isles; he had, or said he had, a few coral reefs, a few spice forests, a few sugar plantations, a few whole islands even; perhaps he had a few savage wives also; at any rate he had many royal savage friends in King Ooo-too-ta, and King Fee-fi-fa, and King Ze-zoo-za, and all the other dusky monarchs of the smiling seas. From Ooo-too-ta, and Fee-fi-fa, and Ze-zoo-za he meant to get all he wanted; and the idea was already sown in many mercantile minds—soil in which a very tiny seed springs up a giant pumpkin.

Concessions are not as slow-growing as coral.

It was of this that Theodore now wrote; it was of this that Lady Joan thought instead of the dagger. She was a woman who was not conscious

when she dropped from heroics to bathos. She was a woman who even in the depths of her bathos might look ridiculous, but yet never failed to strike home.

With a dagger one may easily fail; but with her vengeance in specie and speculation she never did.

She sat and studied the letters of Theodore and other letters also: her brow was dark with wrath, and in her eyes was ever and again a lightning flash.

The sheep that were sillier than swine were roaring like wolves from whom meat has been snatched. The transfer did not content them. The foreign workmen, English, Irish, and German, were swearing bitter oaths down by the shores of the Faro of Messina because the new direction was about to employ native workmen; and these foolish, fierce, foreign creatures, perhaps because they were in a land without beer or potatoes, were roaring louder than wolves, and could not be quieted.

The roaring reached her ear through the means of her correspondents. It solaced, it

almost soothed her. She knew it was almost madness to Ioris—Ioris, who would not see the beauty and the excellence of the transfer ; Ioris, who felt remorse and cared for honour.

She put this and that together, her hand resting on the old steel cuirass.

Far away in the south were these ravening wolves that he thought it his duty to feed, because by his means they had come where they starved ; further still in the Pacific were these coral isles, with the spice forests, and the dusky kings, and the stores of vague and virgin wealth. She had devised a bridge across the waves of Messina: at a bound her imagination and her will went wider afield, and threw a chain of connection from the Sicilian shores to the coral reefs.

He should be told that the coral reefs should be made to feed the ravening wolves.

He should go to the coral reefs.

Weaker women might have deemed it as easy to uproot the dome of St. Peter's and bear it over the mountains. But she quailed before no difficulties ; she had compassed harder things.

Having made Society accept herself, what was there too hard for her?

He should go to the coral reefs.

As the eagle lifted Ganymede in its talons and bore him away, so should her mighty will uplift him in its claws and bear him to far isles and distant shores. If he would ever return, who knew, who cared? Shut in a secret drawer she had a foolish scrawl that left her, in event of his death before her, Fiordelisa. He had given the paper long ago; he had half-forgotten it; he attached no import to it. To a man still young Death seems so vague a word to play with, if it please a woman.

'He shall go,' she said in her solitude, and her brow cleared. Since here her rival was, and his new love, and his fresh passion, and she saw no other means, from his own land he must depart. She did not pause to ask how she would move him; she had done harder things.

She drew her pen and ink to her; and wrote to her Theodore in the dusky den.

'Io's health has broken down under the strain of all this anxiety,' she wrote in conclusion. 'He

is so harassed with his wish to make it all up with the old shareholders. One cannot quarrel with so noble, if exaggerated, a sense of duty. I think your idea will be the very thing for him. I have not named it to him yet. When the whole affair is quite ripe then we will act; you will tell me. You had better come over; your room is all ready. The voyage with you will do him good, and, who knows? Perhaps we may all come there some day. I have always wished to see those mango groves and those turquoise seas ever since I read "The Earl and the Doctor." Io must make money somehow; he has spent too much on those howling beasts whom *he* calls victims; and I do very much fear, unless we can help him with these projects of yours, that his pictures will have to be sold, and his palace in the city too, and heaven only knows what else! Come over, Theo, and be quick about it.'

Then she signed 'Joan,' with a fine flourish.

What did she want with a dagger?

Yet, the letter done, she sat sullen and gloomy whilst the sun died off her casements.

Let vengeance be sweet as it will, it is never

so sweet that it can smother the acid and bitter of humiliation and betrayal.

She went out and posted her letters with her own hands, like the wise woman she was, and then she made a series of visits as the sun set.

'Go yourself if you please; not I,' said Ioris, with petulant contempt, when he heard of this. He knew her Theodore as a common, scheming, shrewd, and vulgar little person, who had been distasteful to him, that was all.

'Of course I said it in jest,' she answered, being too wise to throw her cards on the table. 'The idea of my going! The idea of *my* being anywhere except at dear old Fiordelisa! But, jesting apart, *amor mio*, have you any conception, I wonder, of how much you have thrown away on those workmen down by the sea? I have been computing it all. I am afraid you will have to do something—unpleasant. Would you like me to tell you——'

'Another time, another time,' he said hastily.

'Very well,' said Lady Joan, with the marvellous patience to which she had braced herself. 'Only don't blame *me* if you drift into trouble,

that's all. By the way, I want a gang of eighty new men put on to work at those new vineyards. Money? You have money for those yelling brutes by the sea, but of course you have no money for useful work at home. By the way, Io, what do you think if our way of planting and irrigating were tried in the Pacific? Theo tells me there are most astonishing capacities for production in the soil out there, but all wasted in bad management, as your lands were till I took them in hand.'

'Take the savage isles in hand, then,' said Ioris, with some roughness and contempt.

She laughed good-humouredly.

'It's a long way to go, and Fiordelisa can't spare me yet,' she said. 'I never loved any spot on earth as I love Fiordelisa. How I long for April, to be living under the dear old roof once more; don't you?'

Ioris was silent.

'Since Fiordelisa is mine——' he began, with hesitation.

'What is yours is mine,' she interrupted him, as she smiled in his eyes. 'Ah, yes, dear, I know;

it is good of you to say it again, though—— Hush! Some one is coming.'

It was Mr. Challoner who entered, his hands, as usual, filled with papers and newspapers.

'This is a very fine idea about the Pacific,' he said in his most solemn manner. 'It promises extraordinarily well. Theodore always knows. . . . . If one could get a capitalist to take it up and issue the shares? A beautiful climate, a delightful voyage, an interesting, unsophisticated people, a soil that is the garden of the world——'

'You are not writing the prospectus yet, Robert,' said his wife drily. 'I was asking Io if he would like the voyage. The sea air might do him good; he looks so very ill. Those shipwrights worry him so.'

'I am almost inclined to go myself,' said Mr. Challoner in his usual spirit of self-sacrifice. 'I believe there are very beautiful varieties of *ninfea* to be found there, especially the *ninfea rubra*.'

'We'll all go some day,' said the Lady Joan, with her happy decisiveness; 'some day between vintage and spring time, so as not to lose much of Fiordelisa.'

Ioris stood between them in the familiar chamber that he had so long frequented, that stifled him between its stuff-draped walls, and the courage was wanting in him, though so strong the longing, to cry to them both, 'Let my future be quit of you; stand off! Let me be ruined, but let me at least be free!'

He stood silent, his head bent, his colour changing, as his desire strained against the weakness of his will.

She flashed a glance at him from her keen eyes and read his soul as though he spoke his thoughts. In years bygone she would have burst into tempestuous reproach, into mad rage; but, grown prudent with peril and cold in caution, she kept her patience still.

'We will all go together,' she said, with her frank and cheerful smile. 'You shall go for your water-lilies, Robert, and I for coral, and Io for a fortune. And we will bring the lilies, and the coral, and the fortune all back to Fiordelisa, and be happier than ever!'

Mr. Challoner smiled benignly as far as ever he could be said to smile.

'We will go for the *ninfea* and the coral certainly if you like, my love,' he said amiably. 'As for the fortune, Ioris must please himself. We have no right to persuade him or even suggest to him; he is his own master; we are only his friends.'

There was no one listening to be impressed by it; but Mr. Challoner never dropped the stage toga and the stage tones even in the privacy of intimate friendship.

The Lady Joan went out and paid more visits.

'Theodore—you remember Theodore White?' she said to several people. 'He was staying with us at Fiordelisa two years ago, and in the winter too. You know he has vast influence in the Pacific; yes, in all those wondrous tropical spicy isles we read about and feel never to believe in; he saved some savage king's life there; and he has great possessions there; and, indeed, he has a very fine idea: nothing less than to create a network of steam communication from isle to isle; in time it will make them quite a sea-confederation. Theodore has great talent at combination. Would you like to be in it, anybody?

Well, I will tell you all about it, then, when I hear more. Theo will come over before he goes back to the Pacific. I fancy the scheme will interest Io. If it would only help him! Alas! yes, he has spent so much maintaining all those foreign navvies and shipwrights; nobody else would have done it; but he has such a noble sense of honour, and is always ready to sacrifice himself. Poor Io! Really, if my husband did not restrain him a little he would ruin himself in a week. Mr. Challoner is always very generous, too, but he is more practical than poor Io. Wouldn't you like to see those coral islands and all the dear primitive, unsophisticated, childlike people? I should.'

And she spoke thus in many different ways, in many suitable places, being a woman who always had the right regard for appearances, and knowing that when a vulture soars away with prey in its talons it should always look like an eagle—or a guardian angel—if possible.

When many people were around them, she would jest and jeer at him.

'Io?' she would cry. 'Oh, Io is to be made immortal in the Paris Salon, so they say. What

a fine thing for him that he should have charmed a Muse! Look at him: he is quite ashamed of all his glories. He is quite thankless, you see. Do you go to Etoile's atelier? No? She lets no one in, they say; is that true? Well, I suppose she has her reasons. But they tell me if you do go you will see Io as Sordello—Io in all kinds of studies and of casts. What it is to be enamoured of him! It must be quite delightful to be so much in love. I wish I could be, but I never was.'

And then she would laugh frankly and show her handsome teeth.

'Poor Io does not like it—man's ingratitude! We call him Sordello; it plagues him so; he works himself into quite a rage when I chaff him about his conquest.'

Then, with a touching regret and modesty, she would change her tone and lower her voice and say:—

'It is most painful, really, to us. We never thought we were preparing such distressing scenes for him when we asked her here; he is so gentle and so trustful, one is always afraid he may fall into her hands at last. Oh, no, we never see her. My

husband would not allow me ; of course one always concedes a great deal to genius. But still—and, after all, who knows if it be genius? Some say it is only borrowed plumes. Yes, I am very sorry that she came to Rome.'

Then she would take her mourning crape out of the throng of matrons and spinsters to whom she had thus spoken, and go away with a candid, cheerful smile, pointing to Ioris standing aloof :—

'Look at "Sordello!" How pensive he is, and how bored he looks! He must feel all the conspicuous unpleasantness of being a celebrity—vicariously! Do go to her atelier and see if you can see the picture. But I believe she won't let you in; she has grown quite *sauvage*, they say. What a thing it is to have a grand passion! Especially an unreturned one.'

And she laughed so cheerily and contemptuously that Society never noticed that she drew the man she laughed at after her black skirts, and took him home with her.

'Very well done, very well done indeed; a little overdone, perhaps, a little over-acted, but clever, undeniably clever,' said Lady Cardiff, hearing and

watching the same sort of speech and the same sort of sneer half a score of times in as many different houses. But Society was not as clear-sighted; Society thought that Lady Joan was always outspoken and frank, and was very naturally and very properly impatient of foolish sentiments to which she was herself too wise to stoop; and Mr. Silverly Bell murmured, with a sigh, as he shook his head:—

'A woman that is all *mind* cannot understand the vagaries of unjustifiable passions. Talk to Joan Challoner of love! she does not know what you mean, not she! She is all mind.'

Thus she was not idle, nor were her echoes idle either, in this tedious time of enforced seclusion, when she could trail her skirts through no cotillons and launch her cascade of confetti from no Carnival break, but could only go decorously to clergymen's breakfasts and spinsters' tea-fights, and could only solace herself at home with guitar and cigars, with private purchases and public companies, with Fiordelisa and friendship.

'Some one should tell Etoile,' said Lady Cardiff to Vera von Regonwalde.

'Tell Etoile? Who should tell her? We have not her confidence; we do not even know what she and Ioris are, or are not, to one another.'

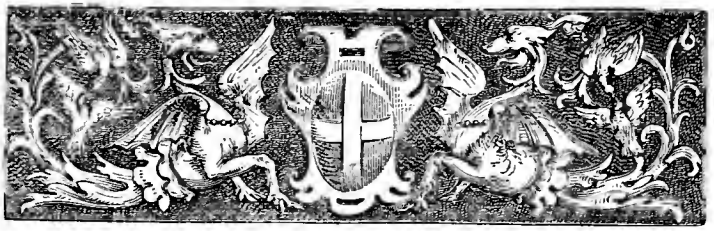
'Some one should tell her,' said Lady Cardiff, having for the fiftieth time heard the scoff and the sneer and the slander of Etoile's enemy.

'It would be very difficult,' said Princess Vera.

'Difficult, perhaps, and I never meddle. Yet it is infamous that she should be jeered at by that black-browed audacity and not know it. It is true she tells us nothing, but I am sure that Ioris has entangled her without disentangling himself. It is what I foresaw he would do. It is of no use regretting, but it is melancholy. It is always women like that who suffer. Those people with fine brains and with generous souls will never learn that life is after all only a game—a game which will go to the shrewdest player and the coolest. They never see this; not they; they are caught on the edge of great passions, and swept away by them. They cling to their affections like commanders to sinking ships, and go down with them. They put their whole heart into the hands of others, who only laugh and wring out

their lifeblood. They take all things too vitally in earnest. Life is to them a wonderful, passionate, pathetic, terrible thing that the gods of love and of death shape for them. They do not see that coolness and craft, and the tact to seize accident, and the wariness to obtain advantage, do in reality far more in hewing out a successful future than all the gods of Greek or Gentile. They are very unwise. It is of no use to break their hearts for the world; they will not change it. *Le culte de l'humanité* is the one of all others which will leave despair as its harvest. Laugh like Rabelais, smile like Montaigne; that is the way to take the world. It only puts to death its Sebastians, and makes its Shelleys not sorrowful to see the boat is filling.

'The boat shall not fill for her if I can help it,' said Princess Vera. 'I will try and tell her something.'



CHAPTER XLVII.

Ioris left their house that day, after the discussion on the coral and the *ninfea*, and went home to his own.

Her portrait looked no longer on him from the wall; he had removed it, giving her as the pretext that to have it hung there hurt her good name. In its stead hung a brown saint on a gold ground of some old tender and sombre Umbrian painter.

But he always looked up to the place on the wall, and felt the fierce eyes upon him, though they were there no more.

The golden balls on the orange boughs swayed against the open casement; there was a soft blue

sky such as Raffaelle loved; birds were singing. Spring had come.

He sat down and leaned his head on his arms. He felt ashamed and contrite, stung with remorse and conscious of cowardice; weighed down, too, beneath a burden of obligation and of irrevocable errors. A shudder ran through him; he felt exhausted with a sickly sense of fatigue.

He knew very well that he was ruined, or would be so in a very little space. It unnerved him, and kept him mute and irresolute. It is easy to deride riches, but they give us a supreme ease and force which without them are hard to attain. To hear her parcelling out the years to come, seizing and mortgaging his future, made him feel as the garrotted slave may have felt when, bound and helpless, he heard Nero and Locusta talk before him of how they would torture his living body, and of when and where.

There were masses of unopened correspondence before him; he turned from them with reluctance and aversion: at this hour he was wont to be with Etoile, his hand ruffling the hair above her brows, his eyes watching her with a smile.

In the pain and depression of the moment his heart almost hardened against her.

'She should not have listened to me,' he thought, with love's captious ingratitude. 'I am not what she thinks me; I never shall be.'

Why had he not left the Muse aloof in the coldness of art? Why had he brought her mortal pains and joys? His conscience reproached him, and his remorse made him capricious and unjust.

'Why did she trust me, why does she place her faith in me?' he thought. 'If she only knew me as I am!——'

And then all his heart went out to her in an ineffable tenderness.

He thought of all he had seen and heard in Paris, of her works and the strength that was in them, and the many talents that the world wondered at, and the grace and the colour of all things that she did, and the coldness that men blamed in her, hurt by her neglect; and to him she was timid as the doe; at a word he could make her heart flutter in her breast; against him she had no more strength than has a flower in the hand that holds it.

Yet almost he wished he had never loved her, nor she him.

Suddenly the door of his chamber opened, and in the ruddy glow of the light from the setting sun he saw her.

He rose appalled by the look on her face, and knowing that to bring her to his house there must have been some great and sudden cause at work.

Her hair was ruffled above her eyes that were dark and wet; her lips were very pale. She came hurriedly towards him; her hands trembled as they touched him.

'I have come; perhaps I have done wrong; I could not wait for your coming to me. They make a by-word of my name in that house of hers, I hear, and they say you stand by silent. Is it true? It cannot be true. You are not a coward.'

His conscience made the word smite like a sword: he grew as pale as she.

'Is this your faith?' he said in evasion, and he put her hands away as if in anger.

'It cannot be true,' she murmured. 'In society I hear (it is a common jest) that she says

foul things of me, and that you listen; that you let her speak ill of me; that you deny—deny——'

'Deny what?'

'What we are to one another.'

'No one knows what we are to one another; is it not the very charm of our love? Who has said this thing to you?'

'A woman who is my friend, yours too; she has heard it some time; at last she told me. My beloved—it is not true?'

'What is not true?' said Ioris with impatience and confusion. 'I cannot understand what you mean. Where have your beautiful calmness and lucidity gone? It is unlike you to tilt at windmills, to split straws.'

'I do not. But can it be true that you—you!—let *her* calumniate *me?*'

He moved angrily and looked away at the sun setting behind his orange trees.

His conscience stung him bitterly, and he took refuge in affected indignation and sternness.

'How should I know what she says or what she does? What is her house more than any other house? I was never her keeper.'

Her lips parted; she would have spoken, but he saw his advantage in his anger, and so pursued it.

'Is this your trust in me? A moment's idle gossip from some fool, and you believe me capable of any baseness.'

'You swore to me not to go to her, yet you were with her in Paris.'

She spoke very low, under her breath, but the unmeant reproach struck him like a scourge.

'I was with her in Paris. Yes. I avowed it to you, I myself; I told you I had sinned, and you forgave the sin. What is forgiveness worth if its ghost rise in reproach like this? You have said I am a coward——'

'I said you were not.'

'You said it so as to mean I was one. What has come to you, whom have you been hearkening to? Is it you who speak of me with strangers, with dolts, and idiots and slanderers? *You?* Can I help what is said in her house? She hates you because I love you. Can you complain of that? She has a bitter tongue, and is a bitter foe; I told you so long since. I cannot help her

saying what she chooses. In Paris I struck two men because they spoke of you too lightly; I cannot strike her: she is a woman. A woman unsexed, if you will, but still a woman; she must say what she will.'

'But you must leave her.'

She spoke very low, but her voice was firm; her eyes shone through their mist with a strong, steadfast light.

'You live in solitude until you dream these things. You are too much alone,' he said, with that manlike inconsistency which turns the obedience it has commanded into a fault and makes of it a reproach. 'Why do you not go into the world as you did when I met you? It would be better—wiser far. It would keep you from these brooding fancies.'

'When you are not with me I am best alone,' she answered him; 'you know that so well. Besides—besides, I cannot risk seeing you beside her; I could not bear it.'

He looked past her out to where the golden fruit of his garden hung in the dusky light.

'What folly!' he said uneasily. 'You are

everything to me, she is nothing. Is not that enough?'

'The world thinks me nothing. It thinks her everything!'

'You are perverse,' said her lover irritably, and his colour changed.

'I have left her in every sense that you can mean. Do you think—can you think—for one moment that you need be jealous of *her?*'

'Jealous!'

She echoed the word in an infinite scorn. It seemed to lower her to the level of the woman they spoke of, to sink her all at once to the intrigues and baseness of low thoughts and of gross passions. Jealous!—she!—who had found him in his captivity and learned from him to disdain the tyrant who chained him in it!

'I do not think that I am jealous,' she said coldly. 'That is not the word to use between us. Can I be jealous of what so long ago you told me was a weariness and a shame to you? No, it is not that.'

'It is that,' he said, with a passing amusement in her pain. 'Yes. You are jealous, my proud

one. But you need not be. I cannot break with her, just yet, entirely—as a friend, I mean—not yet, because of all the meshes that hold me, all that she knows of, all we are embarked in—I have told you so. As for her calumny, how can I tell what she may say? She speaks in her own tongue; it passes me as the wind does. What spirit has changed you that you become like other women, all at once, and stoop to their low level and listen to the chatter of the world? I thought you never would have wronged me *so*. It is not worthy of you. What, you, my Muse, a listener to babbling, drivelling rumour-mongers! Oh, for shame!'

A faint smile came on her face; she looked at him, and all her love was in the look.

'Dear, if you give your word it is enough for me.'

His eyes did not meet hers.

'I have given it. Let it be enough.'

A spasm of doubt ached through her heart, but she was silent.

'Forgive me,' she murmured, after a pause. I did not think, indeed, that you could hear

any ill of me and be mute—and ill from her!—but yet the mere thought hurt me so. Forgive me that I did you any wrong.'

'I forgive,' he murmured—he who had done the wrong—and kissed her.

For the first time she shrank a little from him.

'Wait,' she said wearily. 'Does she not know the truth yet?'

'No. I never speak of you; it is best so—yet—for a little longer.'

'It is always—a little longer.'

'Were I not half-ruined, it should be to-night.'

'How can she help or hinder you?'

'The woman that is forsaken is an enemy: she will be the bitterest the world ever saw.'

Etoile raised herself and looked at him once more. She was still very pale.

'But you will forbid her to go to Fiordelisa? That at least—for me.'

He was silent.

A certain resolve and imperious will, that he had never seen there, which if he had seen it

oftener might have saved himself and her, came on her face as she gazed at him.

'You will keep her from Fiordelisa, if you love me—now.'

'I will. That I swear to you.'

He spoke hastily, but he spoke with resolution.

Then, having his word, she went away from his house which she scarcely ever entered, and in which she always stayed unwillingly, because it seemed to her, like Fiordelisa, desecrated and usurped by the memory of a dead base passion.

When she passed out into the red evening light two dusky figures were hastening by on the other side of the street; they were the sisters from the Forum Trajani.

'There are her watchdogs,' he muttered. 'They have seen you. You should not have come. I should have been with you ere the sun set.'

He bowed to her ceremoniously, standing with uncovered head. Her horses bore her away through the red glow towards her home.

The watchdog hurried to the Casa Challoner.

'I have proof positive, dearest, now!' that admirable creature cried. 'She came out of his house—*out of it*—we both saw her—five minutes since!'

The eyes of the Lady Joan grew cold.

'I know it, dear,' she answered tranquilly. 'She is always going to his house. What can Io do more than show her out again? He is a gentleman and too gentle-hearted, else he might do something rougher.'

'But it is disgraceful!'

'Oh, yes; but what can one expect?'

'It is disgraceful!'

And the watchdog's back was up and its teeth set—in the interests of morality, of course; nothing more.

Lady Joan smiled still, coldly.

'Poor Io! he *would* think a Paris Corinna a Tenth Muse, and an innocent recreation, and he gets his punishment! It is really hard on him though to be so persecuted, just because he made himself a little pleasant in my house to a stranger. You know Io's pretty manner, dear; you know it means nothing.'

Marjory did know—had known, to her cost. She sighed a little, and was silent.

'Will you not speak to him?' she said hesitatingly. 'It is really so disgraceful!'

Lady Joan laughed outright.

'Speak to him? Not I! What is it to me? It serves him right; he would play with edged tools. All that matters to you and me, dear, is not to know Etoile; and we don't know her. Let Io take care of himself; if he have got into any trouble through imprudence.'

Then she went out into society, and said much the same thing—more cautiously, or more slightingly, as her prudence told her was best. She did not go out very much, being still ostensibly in deep grief, but she saw a very large number of persons; and to most of them contrived to say, 'Etoile? Oh, yes, I don't know her this winter—I do not like to know her, you see, after all my poor father told me. Great genius? Oh, yes! that, of course, though it is odd she paints nothing here. But I believe she is in love with our poor friend Ioris—yes, Ioris, that you so often see about our house—she took a

fancy to him, meeting him two or three times, and has left him no peace ever since. We laugh at him very much. It makes him so angry, because really he never thought twice about her. But artists are always like that.'

So she would say, with a broad smile and a frank laugh, a hundred times a week, and going homeward, casting off her mask, would lock herself in her own chamber, and weep, and rave, and moan in all the fury and the feebleness of a woman that knows herself betrayed and forsaken.

But she was stubbornly brave and coldly wise The fit over, the storm passed; she picked up the mask and put it on again; and when she saw Ioris still met him as though she knew nothing, and was full of eagerness and news about the brood mares at Fiordelisa and the coral of the South Sea Isles.

Meanwhile Etoile paced up and down her old grey terraces under the evening skies with a bitter sense of humiliation and of bewilderment; though passion had bound its bands upon her eyes and kept them so long closed, she had seen prevarication and trouble upon his face as he had

listened to her, and had not seen the frank, firm indignation of a man wrongfully accused.

For calumny she cared nothing.

It was like a hot wind, bringing sand and pestilence, no doubt, but she had never heeded it; she had kept the doors of the house of her life closed against it, and had always thought that it had only power to harm the feeble. But calumny that he had stood by and heard!—that hurt her like a blow; not for itself, but to think that he could let it pass unpunished, that he could let the woman he despised utter it unrebuked.

A sudden consciousness fell on her with a heavy weight of pain that all unwillingly she had failed to loosen the bands about his fate, and had only bound the chains about her own; failed, as high natures and dreamful lives so often fail where the harder, shrewder, meaner temper aims aright, and conquers.

She looked at her canvas and her marble and smiled very wearily.

'Any fool had been wiser than I!' she thought, and her heart ached with sad derision of itself.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

Between them from that day there fell a certain shadow of restraint.

It began—

'That drifting slow apart,
All unresisted, unrestrained,
Which comes to some when they have gained
The dear endeavour of their soul
As two light skiffs that sailed together,
Through days and nights of tranquil weather,
Adown some inland stream might be
Drifted asunder each from each,
When, floating with the tide, they reach
The hoped-for end, the promised goal,
The sudden glory of the sea.'

In him the consciousness of error was a daily burden; into her the anguish of doubt had entered like an injected poison. When they met

there was a name they could not speak; a memory they strove in vain to exorcise. Uneasily he affected a serenity he could not command; vainly she tried to show a faith she could not feel. The restlessness of conscious disloyalty was in him; the restlessness of perpetual apprehension was with her. The infinite charm of perfect freedom and of perfect faith was gone. He knew that he was not wholly true, and she feared it.

'I am a coward in her eyes!' he thought; and the thought stung him because of the truth there was in it; and he felt angered against her because she had been courageous always, and could not comprehend the hesitations and vacillations of his nature which unnerved him and kept him halting and mute before his tyrant. To say the truth simply because the truth it was, seemed to her so easy, and to him so hard.

'You do not understand,' he would say to her irritably; and she would be silent, wishing not to wound him; and so 'the rift within the lute' was made, and its music became mute.

Circe brewed her simples and changed men

into swine. His destroyer was no sorceress, but she had a brutalising and enervating power, as every grosser nature has when once it fastens on what is at once loftier, yet weaker, than itself.

He would leave Etoile vowing to himself to see his tyrant no more, to let her take lands, and repute, and everything she chose from him, but to force her to leave him free. Then that all-pervading, all-destroying influence that was in his life, as the smell of the camphor-wood in the chamber, would seek him out, and environ him, and emasculate him, and he would be once more untrue to his fairest faith, and once more heart-sick of himself and of the woman who mastered him, and ashamed before himself and before the woman that he loved.

'She shall never go to my home again'—so he had vowed; yet as the spring stole on and the old ways were trodden by her with sure feet, and she laughed and talked of Fiordelisa and the summer and the future, his nerves seemed paralysed: he kept silent.

What more did she want? Nothing.

Silence gives consent.

Feebler women would have read his aversion in his glance, known his desire from his absence, understood his reluctance from his silence, but she cared for none of these things. She knew all that they meant, but she had shaped her course and abided by it. Long before, hanging her cashmere in his entrance-hall, she had resolved to stay there for ever and aye. Should so mere a reed as his own wish combat the stubborn steel of her will? Never!

He was silent, and she took her course.

Great is the power of stubbornness, and greater yet that of violence.

Love shall fail, honour shall droop, manliness shall cower, dignity and uprightness shall perish, but these powers shall endure and conquer; the powers of the brazen brow and of the brazen tongue.

'You are above me; why did you ever stoop to me?' he murmured once to Etoile, and felt the thing he said.

He hated the lower life, the grosser aims, the coarser thoughts, the looser creeds, of the other life that had been so long by his; and

yet the higher in its turn oppressed and troubled him.

'You are like the edelweiss: one must climb so high to grasp you,' he said, smiling; yet though he smiled he felt a sense of strain upon him, and of an atmosphere too clear for eyes long used to the mistier air of lower levels.

In the first hours of all passion there is a supreme exaltation which sustains and intoxicates; but, these hours passed, the force of habit and of old association reassert themselves, and, if they be of gross fibre, will draw grossly downward the nature which temporarily escaped them.

With Etoile he had been happier than he had ever been in all his years; but, had she been a lower woman than she was, she would have kept him more constant, more content, and, measuring the forces against her better, would better have defeated them.

As it was she loved him, gave all to him, trusted him, and lost him—perhaps by her own fault. She thought it her own fault always. Who does not that loves?

Once more the flowers grew thick in the

grassy ways; the grape-blossom was once more on the vine, and once more the Campagna was a tossing sea of flowers, with white acacia for the foam. Shut in her gardens of Rocaldi, Etoile left the world to say of her what it might, what it would; and in the warmth and the oppression of the city her rival, warier, wiser, colder, and more cautious, smiled on the world and said:—

'I shall soon be at Fiordelisa; my husband is so fond of Fiordelisa: we all are. Yes, I have saved it for poor Io—really I may say I have saved it. It is so pleasant to be of use to a friend.'

The world cast a stone at the shut gates of Rocaldi; it nodded cheerfully to the open gates of Fiordelisa. The world does not like to be ignored; and it never forgives a closed door. Lady Joan knew that well, and she threw her doors open.

'Look how frank and careless she is. As if there could be any sin in a woman so candid as that!' said the world in return for her concession; but of Etoile, aloof, indifferent, going by with mute disdain and absent thoughts, it was willing

to believe any evil. Why not? She did nothing to amuse it; she did not even pay it the compliment of fear.

Meanwhile, as the keen grey eyes of his tyrant flashed in the eyes of that yet harder tyrant, the world, and her clear, ringing, rough tones cried twenty times a day to Society, 'We are going to Fiordelisa—yes!—you must all come to Fiordelisa,' the heart of Ioris as he heard sank as a stone sinks under the waves.

At any hesitation, any anxiety, any interrogation from her, he would have hurled the truth at her and have let her do her worst; but in the cool assumption of right as a matter of course there lies an irresistible power; it makes a conqueror of the mortal, as of the nation, that knows aright all its force.

She never gave him the chance of any moment of doubt in her own perfect title; she spoke, she wrote, she worked, she schemed, she planned, she prophecied, sweeping all the future into the measure of her sight, as one conscious of a kingdom that no enemy could invade nor any accident diminish.

In its small way it was an almost superb insolence of possession; in her own heart she was on fire with rage, thrilled through and through with dread, and knew that any instant her throne might fall and her exile might begin, but she never let one sign of this knowledge ever escape her.

Hour on hour, day after day, she smiled steadily at him, and at the world, and said:—

'Fiordelisa! dear Fiordelisa! yes, we are going there. We think we shall winter there; we mean to live and die there. It is a dear old place.'

She knew all that he did, every hour that he spent elsewhere, every letter that was written to him; she found means to know everything, being once on the track of his infidelity; but no single sign of all she knew ever escaped her; she had even self-command enough to hold her peace and never reproach him for his absence, never upbraid him for his coldness, but go on steadily in her old ways, with her scales and her stud-book, her ledgers and her steam-engines, her noisy economies and her showy extravagances.

Love? She knew its feebleness well. It will burst through a tempest and break down a wall of ice, but against the dull, impenetrable, commonplace sand-heap of a changeless routine it falls back powerless as the lofty, impetuous waves of the sea fall back from the massed earth of a level dyke.

The waves fret themselves in vain: the dyke conquers.

In her own strange way she still loved him; in her own sullen way she now hated him; but hate and love both subsided before her resolve to keep her hold on his life and on Fiordelisa. Besides, it was a form of vengeance: the widest and the heaviest vengeance she could take; and even in her fury she was shrewd and wise.

So the oxen began to drag the household gods once more towards the old grey walls on the hillside, and once more she began to prepare for her summer sojourn; and Ioris, hearing and knowing, felt his heart stand still as he remembered that he had sworn that no more should she ever dwell under his dead mother's desecrated roof.

'That at least, if you love me!' had said

Etoile. And he loved her; yet he stood by and saw the oxen go, the exodus begin.

'My wife!' he murmured to Etoile, still with his arms about her, when once more the nightingales began their song; and in all honesty he meant still to vindicate her honour to the world, and give her all he had to give in answer for her sacrifice to him of peace, and fame, and use, and art.

But meanwhile the wife of another pursued her shameless and guilty way, and went across his threshold and sat by his hearth, and laughed, and claimed his future. And the courage was lacking in him that was needed to thrust her from his doors; and the courage was also lacking in him to lift up before the world as his nearest and dearest the life that through him the world had calumniated.

For the courage thus needed was of another fibre than that which faces the duel and fears no battle.

Though there were many times when he longed to let the world know how he, and he alone, had had power to 'break the nautilus shell' and

make a captive of what other men had found beyond their reach, there were other times when the base, noxious vapours of slander found their way to him and stifled his higher resolves. He never doubted that they were more than vapour; but he knew that such vapour is the world's breath, and he had not courage to thrust his hand down the dragon's throat and tear out its pestilential tongue.

The triumph of being beloved by a woman whom the world had crowned, was precious to him; but the courage of being true to a woman whom the world also slandered, was not in his nature.

Morning, noon, and night, wherever he went, wherever he moved, wherever a group was gathered together, or a dispute of voices fell on his ear, she whose interest it was to divorce him from Etoile contrived, with her many echoes, that he should perpetually hear some innuendo, some falsehood, some foulness set afloat by her, and living the lusty life that a lie does live in common with other blatant, poisonous things. He knew that lies they were, and yet he recoiled from meeting

them with an open scorn, a fierce denial. His love had always been rather triumph than tenderness. Love that is chiefly triumph is usually captious and exacting, and apt to quarrel with the very food it craves.

So he hesitated, so he waited, so he trusted to chance to cut the knots into which his fate had entangled itself, and he forgot that chance only favours those strong enough to compel it. And meantime he let the bronzed, frank face of his destroyer smile up to his, and let her fierce voice cry unchallenged:—

'We go to Fiordelisa!'

He did not mean to let her go; with the hand of Etoile in his he dreamed of another life for his old home; but meantime the moments and the hours and the days slipped away, and he only reached a double infidelity, a dual treason, and began to turn uneasily from the clear gaze of the eyes he had kissed into blindness. Perhaps no crime, no sin, no fault, no folly, brings so much woe as does the one terrible error of irresolution.

It is an acid that eats away all the gold of

life, imperceptibly but surely, till we are left with empty hands, quite beggared; and only know our loss when to know it is all too late.

Ioris stood irresolute, with strong force of desire but no strong force of action, wishing, waiting, playing with his fate; and fate fell on him and crushed him, as it always crushes those who do not seize and make it bless them.

Then came one hot and sickly day, when, though it was in springtime, there were dearth and sickness in the heavy greyness of the air.

Etoile stood alone in her studio.

The Sordello remained still incomplete, but pure and brilliant in its colour, as though it had been conceived in Venice in days of the Republic and the Renaissance. There were other studies; there were casts in clay; there was a head in marble—they all had the same features.

'My beloved, you have made me a woman, but you have killed me as an artist,' she said half-aloud as she looked on them, too true an artist not to know her loss, and that her art was now not vision but only remembrance.

Her eyes were wet as she looked.

The loss of the power of fancy to the artist, is like the loss of its wings to the bird.

She walked restlessly to and fro the stones of the floor.

Once—was it yesterday, or was it a score of years away?—she had flown to her work, when the day broke, with such strong joy in it that she never felt physical fatigue or solitude or any flight of time. Now—she only listened for one step. When she heard it not, the long, pale, weary day seemed cold as death, empty as a rifled grave.

This day he had not come; it had passed and gone without one moment that recorded joy or use; she was ashamed at her own apathy and feebleness, but they were stronger than she: she could not strive against them: she felt an unspeakable depression and foreboding that deepened as the days wore on. Why would he not speak? Why would he not be true? Together they were happy—yes; but behind them, like a sullen shadow, always stood the memory of that fierce and furious passion that was betrayed.

'If *I* told her the truth?' she thought; and

then her heart misgave her, and she was afraid the mere thought had been disloyal to him, as if doubtful of his good faith.

It was not for her to speak when he kept silent; and yet——

She felt humiliated and stung with a sense of outrage, to think that he would not rise and say of herself, 'This is where my love lies now, and all my trust and honour.'

Now and then, seeing far off in a street crowd or at a chamber window the face of her foe, she had felt a sickening thrill of pain; not jealousy, as he thought; not jealousy; who can be jealous of what they know is scorned?—but some such impetuous hatred and disgust as she would have felt at seeing a snake wind up about his limbs, and she, herself, doomed to look on the while, and powerless to stir.

He did not understand that; he only thought her jealous. Men see but a little way into the hearts of women.

When he sat at her feet, and leaned his head on her knees, he thought he understood her, because he did only too fatally understand that he

was the master of her life, the single thought of her entire existence; but he did not understand her aright, because he thought the feeling which moved her against her foe was the mere restless jealousy of her sex, whereas it was the far deeper, and far more noble, hatred of the nature that was true and bold for the nature that was false and base.

'If she had ever loved you truly *once* I could have forgiven her from my heart, even if she had killed me,' she had said to him.

He had smiled and kissed her, but he had not understood.

He had thought it a mere pretty poetic exaggeration of words. He had said to himself that no women ever forgive each other to whom the same lover is dear.

This day he did not come; the morrow passed, and he was still absent. It was grey, heavy, sickly weather, that not even the outburst of blossom and flower could beautify. She counted the hours till her heart grew sick.

The nightingales began their earliest notes in the palms at evening; she closed the casements

against the song; she could not bear to hear it—alone. It seemed to her that the time grew very long, that his silence lasted till it became dishonour to them both.

'If I were to tell her?' she thought again and again; and still the thought seemed to her to be a base one, to be like a betrayal of him; and she rejected it, and felt ashamed of it.

Another day came and there was no word of him. She wrote, and then tore up all she wrote, being unwilling to seem to imitate the exactions and the persecutions of her rival. With her he should be always free.

She would not cage her nightingale.

The sun was low and red, the air was dull; she walked through the blue flag-lilies that once more filled the grass, and her heart was sick with foreboding.

It seemed to her that any fool would have been wiser than she had been.

He was not changed; when with her he was passionate and tender as when the blue lilies had bloomed in the year before, but she had learned that cruel truth which all women who themselves

love greatly do learn, that a victorious love is not as eager nor as suppliant as a love that hopes yet fears.

She had had no strength, and with him she should have been very strong.

From her terraces she could see in the distance the old grey towers of Fiordelisa amidst the dark cypress and ilex woods of its hillside. She looked at the dusky clouds that she knew were those of his own woods, and she felt comforted.

'There at least she will never go,' she thought; 'and when he forbids her Fiordelisa, she will know the rest.'

And she plucked one of the azure irises and put it in the white folds of her dress. Just so had he set one there last year, and he would surely come, she thought, this evening.

She walked to and fro, while the sun sank out of sight, and the mists of the falling night hid Fiordelisa from her.

A servant brought her a message—one of those brief messages that flash the woe of a life in a few curt, bald words.

The message told her that her old home in Paris had, by an accident, been burned to the ground; nothing saved from it but her own bust by Clesinger; and, since misfortunes never come alone, there were other tidings that a man of business in Belgium who had conducted her affairs had robbed her and fled.

Her first thought was of Ioris.

'Will he mind very much?' she thought. It made her much poorer. She stood awhile with the message in her hand, thinking always of him.

Her old treasures had been dear to her, and the things of her art dearer still, and the place had been full of them, but it was only of him that she thought. She awoke as from a trance and saw the servant waiting there.

'Tell them to get the horses,' she said quickly. It was evening; in ten minutes more it would be night. She threw some black laces around her head, and when the horses were ready drove down into Rome.

It was already dark.

To tell her lover was her first impulse; to do

what he thought best; also not to let him for one moment deem her richer than she was.

A woman who is the mistress of a great fame is never altogether poor; but she had lost much that she had saved; she had little left save the power of her hand.

The horses flew on through the dark, down into the heart of Rome, to the banks of the river, where the lamps were all lit, and lights were gliding to and fro on the bridges.

Ioris was not at his house.

She asked where he had gone—the first time that she had ever asked a question respecting him. The man, who knew a little and guessed more, and hated the woman for whom for many years he had had to do so much unpaid service, threw his hands towards the stars and laughed.

'Where should he be, madama mia, but at the Casa Challoner? He came in with milady about five o'clock and they went out together.'

Etoile said nothing; she leaned back on the cushions pale and cold; she felt as if the speaker had stabbed her.

'To the Casa Challoner,' she said, in a cold, clear voice to her coachman.

The servant standing in the doorway heard and was frightened; the horses trotted onwards towards the Corso in the moonlight and gaslight and the deep shadows of Rome.

All memory of the losses that had befallen her faded out of her mind; all she was conscious of was that he was there—*there!*—with all his oaths forsworn.

A very sickness of disgust came on her; the fierce steel-like eyes, the smoke-tainted lips, the twanging guitar, the large firm hands, the loud rough laugh, all that he abhorred, rose before her, in imagination, till all her blood leaped to a scornful hatred she had never known; and the deep blue of the skies above her seemed to her full of fire. She had lost much, she had been robbed, half-ruined; what of that? She forgot it. She only remembered that her lover was faithless.

It was one of those moments for which the world blames women bitterly, yet for which they are not to blame, for in their pain they are scarce con-

scious what they do, and are driven on by sheer swift instincts that they have no power to control.

To go there, to find him there, to cast the truth down between them and see which he would cleave to, to fling at her foe all the scorn, all the disdain, all the knowledge kept down so long in silence—this one impulse alone governed her as she let her horses trot through the still night towards the Temple of the Virtues.

In the moonlight, before the doorway of the house, there were two waggons with teams of low grey oxen, and the waggons were piled high. There was a pause and some altercation, the waggons stopped the way.

'We are loading them with milady's boxes and other things,' the servant of the house said to her coachman. 'We all go up to Fiordelisa to-morrow. Does your mistress wish to call at this time of night? Well, I do not know; I can ask. There is nobody up there but the Prince Ioris.'

Then the man laughed, as servants laugh at such things in Italy, and signed the oxen back, and went into the doorway.

'Drive away!' said Etoile; then she stopped

her horses again in a by-street and descended from the carriage, and walked on alone under the stars.

The coarse laugh of the serving-man had checked the impulse that had brought her to this place; she felt heart-sick with shame; he was there—he! her own, her idol, her treasure that outweighed the world!—he was there, at the feet of the woman he had renounced.

Even in that moment of bitterest anguish she did not deceive herself; she knew well that nothing that need move her to jealousy drove him there, but only the hesitation of temperament, the habit of dominion, the dread of a virago's rage. But all the courage of her own nature leaped up in scorn. He loved her, yet he had spent the starry hours of the early night in reluctant submission to the unholy bonds he had abjured, in cowardly counterfeit of a passion he had renounced, despised, and lived to loathe.

And her rival was to go to Fiordelisa!

The insult entered her very soul like iron.

She was to go to Fiordelisa, this woman whom he had forsaken and contemned; to live in his

home, to be near him all the summer through, to reign there at her will! The outrage of it seemed to her past all endurance.

If the woman he had renounced were to be thus allowed to rule him, what was she herself? less than the very dust in his eyes, surely, or never would he thus insult her.

In the moment of that intense pain, that intense humiliation, Etoile lost her serenity, her patience, her long-suffering tenderness for him. She felt fooled and dishonoured. For the first time since she had felt his lips touch hers she thought of herself and not of him.

Such moments of profound self-abasement come to all who have loved too well. She had been proud and loyal and of infinite truthfulness and faith; she felt betrayed and stung beyond endurance.

She walked up and down in the clear moonlight that had succeeded to the grey and oppressive day. She had utterly forgotten the losses that had fallen on her. The dark and quiet corner where the house of her foe stood, was quite deserted now. The oxen had gone away, and

their loads with them. The arched doors stood open. The porter had also gone down the street. The lamps gleamed in the entrance. The casements above were all lighted; there came from them the echo of a guitar and the sound of a voice humming amorous songs of the populace.

Etoile stood in the moonlight, without, by the open doors and hesitated. If she were to find them together, and fling the truth down between them like a gauntlet? . . . . Would it be freedom for him; or would it be merely vengeance, a vulgar vengeance, worthy of her foe, and not of her?

She stood by the door in the shadow, swayed now by one impulse, and now by another; yielding at one moment to the natural, common instinct of a passion that was wronged, restrained at the other by the higher temper of a love that shrank from base contention of its rights.

The night was very still; there was no one near; above the steep overhanging walls the stars shone. On the stillness the thrum and thrill of the guitar struck clearly from the chambers above; then even that ceased. On the silence she heard a little laugh, and then a mur-

muring voice; the laugh was her rival's; the voice was his.

She shuddered and moved from the threshold, and felt defamed, and dishonoured.

He could laugh there;—he! who had said to her, 'Make me what you think me, what you wish me;——I am yours!'

She walked up and down the stones of the little square before the doors that still stood open, yet she did not enter: it seemed to her so vile, so poor a thing to do; the house was cursed, the very air of it was hateful; she, who had all right and title of a great and loyal love, could not stoop to dispute him, as an avaricious wanton disputes her prey. Yet she could not tear herself from the place. The very silence that had followed on the song and the laugh enthralled her with a horrible sorcery.

He was there—faithless to both.

Eleven o'clock struck; the hours had fled uncounted by her. Her horses waited out of sight; the shadow of some passer-by fell now and then across the white breadths of the moonlight; she did not notice it, nor hear the step.

A heavy sense of bitter humiliation oppressed her, and under it burned the smouldering fires of her scorn. She wandered and waited there alone, as though she were the guilty wife, the wanton paramour; and above, laughing and singing, was that craven sin the world forgave as friendship!—a sin so craven, that not even to itself could it be true.

She did not reason; she only felt heart-sick, outraged, indignant, humbled, stung to a delirious pain.

Suddenly in the stillness there came the jarring sound of a closing door: she was near the house; out of it she saw Ioris pass into the moonlight.

The porter, returning hastily from his wine-shop, hurried in and drew the bolts and bars for the night's safety; Ioris came leisurely forward, along the pavement, in the shadow of the walls; then he saw her, and paused, with a cry, half of pleasure, half of anger.

'Dear, what has happened?' he murmured hurriedly, and cast a glance around, and saw that there was no one near, and would have taken her hands; but she thrust him quickly from her, and

gazed up in his face, the whiteness of her skirts trailing on the dusty stones, the stars shining above them.

'Is this how you keep faith to me?' she said, and her voice was very low.

His face changed; he took refuge in anger.

'Is this how you watch me? what are you doing here, alone, at such an hour? are you waiting for me? I will not have you wait so.'

'You let her go to your home, to-morrow?'

He was silent.

'You let her go? is it true?'

He made no answer; he was very pale; he strove to take her hands again.

'You are excited and angry; you are unlike yourself; how do you come in the streets at such an hour? where are your servants? do you do it to watch me? I will not be watched; I have had enough of that elsewhere, and too much. Why are you here? answer me. I do not understand; I will not be watched. If you want to upbraid me——'

He spoke with all the petulance, the offended waywardness, that took a grace in him like that of

a spoiled proud child; he was stung by his own conscience, and impatient that he had been seen where all the manhood in him told him that it was against all manliness to go.

'I would not upbraid you,' said Etoile, her voice still very low and broken. 'Come a little farther—farther from that house.'

He walked beside her down the shadow of the street, till they were in the white breadth of the moon-rays once more.

'Are you going to lay in wait for me any night that I am not with you?' he said, with a sombre irritation, more affected than real; 'I fancied I was free from such things as that, with you; you have said you trust me; what is trust, if it doubt every act, if it measure every moment. I have had too much of this from another.'

'Have you had too much, since you still go to that other?'

'Oh, you would reproach me! you are like other women after all; after all you are no higher than they are; you suspect; you accuse.'

'I suspect nothing; I see you coming from

her house; you cannot deny that she is to live in your own home, even now after your promise?'

'I made no promise.'

'No promise!'

He was silent, the colour faded from his face.

'I asked you for patience,' he muttered a little later, 'I asked you to trust me and to wait; yes, I promised; but one is not master of oneself. She is nothing to me: cannot that content you?'

'No!'

She threw the laces off her head, and the moon-rays shone in her wet eyes as they gazed into his.

'Dear, I am tired! are you angry, cannot you understand? I am not of marble or of clay; I am only a woman that loves you, and that you love. How can I bear it day after day, to know myself first with you, yet live as though I were nothing to you before the world, and see you in the world's sight pass as hers? Oh, my love! my love! I have had patience, I have kept silence, till

my heart is half broken; do you know anything of what I suffer, when I see you by her, when I hear your voice in her chamber, as I heard to-night? Do you know? I think you cannot. It is not that I am jealous as you think, it is that I am ashamed.'

'*You* ashamed!' he muttered, and his pale cheek grew red.

'Yes, I am ashamed! ashamed of my own feebleness, of my own lack of power, of my own incompetency to save you from the lower life that holds you. Ah, you cannot understand! What use are fame, and praise and power: I have to give place to *her*!'

All the immeasurable scorn that there was in her launched itself out in that one word.

He moved uneasily, and looked away.

'You do not know what you say,' he muttered. 'You are feverish and agitated; let us go from here. To-morrow——'

'To-morrow she goes to Fiordelisa.'

He was silent.

'Does she go to Fiordelisa?'

He was silent.

She laughed a laugh that chilled and terrified him, unlike any he had ever heard upon her lips.

'And you bewailed your slavery to me in almost the first hours that we met! What use was that, since you live on in it by choice; what use to wake my pity, to come to me and lament? . . . . Who is blinded? who is betrayed? who is befooled? Is it she, or is it I? What have you meant of all that you have said? Was all your pain a falsehood?'

Every word entered his soul, as thorns into a wound; his conscience smote him bitterly, but for that very cause his anger rose.

'You insult me! perhaps I merit it. Who can know what to do, where two women claim every moment, and watch every word? I lead the life of a hound! Falsehood? yes, without liberty there is always falsehood. But you leave me no more freedom than she does.'

'I leave you all freedom; are you not free to go to her?'

The blood beat in her temples, the stars swam before her eyes; intense bitterness, intense humi-

liation, intense anguish, were all at war in her; she scarcely knew what she said.

'Are you not free to go to her?' she repeated, 'free to drag my name through the dust for her diversion; free to let me be mocked and slandered by her, you silent all the while?'

'She never names you.'

'That is untrue. She taunts me with an unanswered love, and you stand by and let the shameful lie be said.'

'If you choose to believe the lies of others——'

Her unwonted passion broke into a low sob.

'Oh, my love, whom would I believe against you? Not all the world. But can you say to me on your honour that she knows the truth?'

'No,' he said with a fierce roughness most uncommon in him, 'No, she does not know the truth. I have not told her. I am a coward. You have been pleased to say so.'

She made no answer.

She would have sooner heard him tell her she must die.

'It is the temple of lies,' he said bitterly, with a backward gesture of contempt towards the

house that stood in the gloom behind them. 'I have lived amongst them till they are part of me. What does she know? She knows nothing. If she could tell that I had even kissed your lips she would kill me.'

'Are you afraid?'

She turned and looked at him with a cold disdain that hurt him more than all her rival's wildest savagery of wrath.

'You insult me!' he said under his breath; and his eyes grew sombre and full of fire, but they wandered from her own.

Suddenly she took his hands and held them in her own against her breast.

'My beloved, I will ask your forgiveness for such insult on my knees if you will tell me, with your eyes on mine, that you will go back to that house now and tell her all. All!—before another hour goes.'

She felt his heart beat quickly.

He looked on the ground and not at her.

'You are but a woman like the rest,' he said with evasive irritation. 'It is not my love you want; it is triumph over a rival.'

She dropped his hands and turned away from him. After all the hours of their perfect love, was this all that he knew of her!

'Go to her,' she said as she put him from her with a gesture. 'Go to her: it is she who is fit mate for you—not I!'

The words severed them, as steel cuts the skein of life in twain for ever.

The moonlight fell between them in a chill, pale space of joyless light.

Not looking back once she went away from him into the shadow where her horses were waiting.

He stood like a man who has had a mortal blow, but keeps erect from pride.

He did not follow her.

Their lives were divided for ever, as the chill moonlight severed their shadows.

A casement above, a stone's throw off in the gloom, closed quietly, and behind it, in the darkness, another woman laughed to herself—well content.

All things come to those who know how to wait. She had only had to wait, in patience and

darkness, without seeming to stir a hand, and the end she desired had come.

To hold without mercy, and to be deaf and blind to all that told her the truth: this had been her strength, and it had conquered.

With the morrow to Fiordelisa!

CHAPTER XLIX.

THAT night Etoile wrote the truth to her.

When she had told it, she wrote on :—

'You need fear me no more; he and I are parted, so you may listen to me for a moment. You are stronger than I; you have known how to keep him against his will, and how to ruin his strength and his peace and his fortunes; will you not have pity now? Pity on him. He does not love you; he was weary of you so long, long ago. When I met him first, his captivity was bitter and dreary to him; you must see this—if you would see it—in a hundred signs and ways. I now ask you to set him free. Not for me. I swear to you that we can never again be anything

to one another, because there is the black pit of a cruel lie set like a gulf between him and me. I only ask you for his sake. What is the life you lead him? A life joyless, galling, jaded, unworthy of manhood, robbed of all effort and all hope. You hurt his honour, you stain his name, you make him a byword and a jest. You call this friendship—to the world. I tell you that it is the basest and most cruel passion that ever fed its vanity on the ruin of another soul. I have surrendered him, and I will never claim him if you will set him free—free to find purer faiths and happier ties than mine or yours; free to be able to look his future in the face and feel it his own—not mine nor yours. What can I say to you? how can I move you? You are a base woman, and you have never loved him in any noble sense of love one hour; but, sacrifice me as you like, jest at me, jeer at me, drag my name in the dust, do anything you will of vengeance on me,—only set him free.'

The tears fell from her eyes and scorched and blurred the paper.

Then she tore it up and burnt it.

What use was it to cry to the dead wall, to beat the gates of brass? Sooner will the wall hear, sooner will the brass melt, than the heart of a cruel woman have pity.

CHAPTER L.

It is five o'clock on a summer afternoon at Fiordelisa.

In the old grey court there is the tinkle of teacups, the smell of cigar smoke, the sounds of a guitar; the red bignonia on the south wall is all aglow with blossom; the peacock is strutting amongst the long grass; the bees are humming above the strawberry flowers. Lady Joan is laughing and singing and thrumming the chords of the guitar; she is lying back on a low cane chair; she feels happy.

People have been lunching with her, a few good decorous people who are now strolling about in and out the cortile and gardens one with

another; amidst them Mr. Silverly Bell is murmuring to Mrs. Macscrip:—

'Oh, yes; it is quite an old story now, but only too true, unfortunately, only too true.'

'What really? That she lay in wait for him after midnight?'

'Ah, quite true! and by dear Lady Joan's house, too, making such a scandal! As if Lady Joan had anything—anything—of an incorrect interest in her friend.'

'Shameful!' echoes a chorus of the small gentilities and the free-born republicans, the consuls' wives and the bankers' daughters.

'And she tried to stab him, didn't she, with a dagger out of her studio?' cries that sprightly lady, Mrs. Henry V. Clams, plucking some heliotrope.

Mr. Silverly Bell sighs and is pained.

'Oh, no, that is exaggerated—at least I trust it is exaggerated. Ioris is such a gentleman; *he* never says a word; it is difficult to know the truth, but some people were passing and saw, it seems; . . . . it is very painful. I used to like her, I really did at one time like her. Yes! she

has a charm of manner; yes, until one knows. . . . . But no character, you know, and no capital! . . . . I believe she has had great losses; that she wanted Ioris that night to assist her in some great money trouble, but that kind of thing only makes it very much worse.'

'Very much worse,' says Mrs. Macscrip; 'myself I never will know artists; I am thankful that I did not infringe on my rule for her.'

'You may be so, indeed!' says Mr. Silverly Bell, and he sighs.

'My! she arn't hard up for money; that I'll bet *some*,' says Mrs. Henry V. Clams, casting cake to the peacock. 'She's took Rocaldi to shut herself up in for good and all, and she won't sell that queer picture Sordello, though they'd give her long chalks for it if she would.'

Mr. Silverly Bell sighs again, and as he stoops over the daisies, murmurs—

'Infatuation—aberration!'

'You don't call on her never now?' asks Mrs. Henry V. Clams.

Mr. Silverly Bell feels his silvery hair rise erect from his head.

'Call! *Call?* My dear madam!——'

'You are so almighty virtuous, Mr. Bell, you'd have saved Sodom and changed Lot into salt,' cries that giddy soul with a fine Scriptural confusion of memories. 'Alberto, bring the break round, and go and get my shawl.'

'Dear Mr. Bell feels as we all do,' said Miss Marjory Scrope-Stair. 'Any friend of dear Joan's must hold *her* as an enemy: and any friend of poor Io's also. Besides, any woman must feel shocked and grieved. Why is talent always allied to a deficient moral character?'

No one replies to this general interrogation, but Mrs. Henry V. Clams clinches the matter.

'She's a downright silly not to give it all the go-by, and run back and lark around in her own Paris. Nobody can't ever understand artists though, they're that queer. . . . . Riddle-me-ree and double acrostics is nothing to 'em. Is Alberto gone to get that drag?'

Meanwhile Ioris hears what the Lady Joan is saying.

Some one has asked her if she stays the summer here, and she answers, with a smile:—

'Oh, yes; you know I have so much to do here; they would miss me so. I even think we shall winter here. It is so much warmer than the city, and we are all so happy together. Besides, you know, poor Io is ruined, or very nearly. We shall help him if we live here; you know how great my husband's friendship is for him, and mine too. We mind no sacrifice for a friend. I am going to build four new rooms, by the way; there are ninety-six rooms in the house, but a hundred will be nicer. I shall leave the walls bare till dear Tom Tonans and Pietra Infernale come to stay with me in the autumn; they will paint them for me. Perhaps Io will be away by then. I do hope we shall get something good for him through Theodore.'

Ioris, standing by, hears; and he has lost the power and the right to avenge.

The drag comes round and other equipages. They troop away joyously, leaving only Burletta, who is casting up accounts in a memorandum-book, in the midst of the strawberries; and Marjory Scrope-Stair, who, as she passes her friend, kisses the hand that is toying with the guitar, and kisses

it gushingly but loyally. It is the hand that has fast-locked the fresh fetters.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams, who is shrewd in her own way, and has brought a gleam of the national Yankee humour with her out of the land of wooden nutmegs, is tickled at what she has heard, and laughs to herself as she departs.

'My word!' she murmurs as she drives through the gates. 'If Alberto were to go and fall in love with anybody I wonder if I'd be as clever as that, and be able to turn the tables on the other one and make *her* look like the good-for-nought? My word! no, I shouldn't have patience — I should just go and slap her face.'

And she feels her own inferiority to the Temple of the Virtues.

The afternoon sun sinks lower; the colour deepens; the scent of the blossoms grows stronger, Burletta shuts up his account-book and comes and sits on a stool beside the guitar.

Mr. Challoner reclines in a rocking chair.

The little girl plays with a shuttlecock.

Lady Joan laughs, and now and then she sings.

She has condemned him to perpetual bondage, to lifelong weariness, to endless degradation; she has taken his life like a pressed fruit and wrung it to the core; she has exiled from him all joy, all hope, all peace. Never shall his offspring laugh in the old home of his fathers; never shall any child smile in his eyes with the smile of a woman he loved; never shall any gladness of liberty rise for him in his barren years; never shall any human happiness be his!

Never: never any more, so long as her life shall last and feed on his, and sit by his, and wait and watch, as the tigress waits and watches by the creature it has slain.

She has killed him more cruelly than those do, who slaughter the body.

But what of that? She is well-content.

She shoots her cats and robins, she garners her grain, she fills her purse; she rules at Fiordelisa.

Honour is gone from him, and peace, and hope, and God.

But what of that? She rules at Fiordelisa.

In his chamber alone sits Ioris, having escaped the scene for a moment.

His heart is sick, his life is weary.

For lack of an hour's courage he has surrendered all his future to bondage.

One single falsehood at the first has sprung up into a giant tree, poisonous as the upas, and spreading in fetid darkness for evermore betwixt him and the light of heaven.

He sits in his solitude—so rare a blessing is this solitude, which she perpetually denies him—and the smell of the smoke and the tinkle of the guitar rise in the air to him, and he loathes them.

'Io! Io!' cries a voice, shrill, loud, imperious. 'Io! come down directly, or I shall come up to you!'

Of the two evils he takes the lesser.

He goes down, with a heavy sigh and a slow step.

It is for this woman that he has lost the world, and lost the thing that is greater and deeper than all the world—a love that never dies.

He descends his old stone staircase wearily and listlessly; sullenly and silently he enters the

court, and throws himself into a garden-seat in the shadow of an arched doorway.

She strikes her guitar sharply.

'You look as glum as an owl, Io! How ungrateful of you, when we are going to make your fortune out of the Coral Isles!'

'I am tired,' he mutters wearily.

She laughs: she does not care whether he is tired or not. She has him safe, her prey for ever, through one sad untruth.

The red sun sinks, the red flowers blaze. The child is at play. The smoke curls lightly up amongst the blossoms. It is dreamy and warm. Mr. Challoner, stretched peacefully in his chair, dozes, with a handkerchief over his closed eyes, and thinks. . . . . The Coral Isles are distant. Ioris is poor. A little more speculation, like the piles in the Syrens' Sea, and who knows? Old lands are soon ruined and old names soon tarnished. Fiordelisa is a nice place. Ioris is not very strong. It would make a pretty dower for Effie in years to come; and is there not a title that goes with the estate?

Mr. Challoner in his mind's eye sees the

children of Effie reigning here, where the children of Ioris will be never born.

The Watchdog sits humbly in the shade by the glass doors, and works at a cushion that her friend has begun and has tired of, and ever and again fastens thirsty, longing, anxious eyes upon Ioris, and thinks to herself, *Festina lente! Pazienza!* Who knows? Sometimes a sick and sorrowful soul, jaded and indifferent, falls to the watcher that waits for it, as the beautiful moth with broken wing falls into the web of the patient and crafty spider spinning in the dust: who knows?

Mr. Challoner's wife, with the riband of the guitar lying loose in her hands, shuts her watchful eyes also, and only does not dream because she so seldom commits such a folly. She is a woman of action, not a simpleton. She thinks instead; thinks, and smiles as she thinks.

She has got all she wants, has done all she wished, she is luxuriously content; she feels victorious as the Great Napoleon. She will reign alone at Fiordelisa. Meanwhile, if they become needful, there are Theodore and the Coral Isles. If

Ioris prove restive she will send him to the Coral Isles, and go into society and smile and be smiled at, and say, 'Ah, poor Io! so sad; but we are doing all we can to save his property.'

And she and Society will smile on each other more sweetly than ever; and as she thinks of all this, the picture pleases her so that for once her busy brain grows sleepy, and she also dreams, till the guitar glides off her knee, and the chords that have hymned her amorous songs, so often, to so many ears, are broken.

Ioris alone dares not dream, because for him hope is dead and liberty has perished.

At the same hour as the sun sinks low Etoile prays in her chamber.

'Forgive me that I erred in haste and pain. Forgive me that I had neither wisdom nor strength. Ah, God, forgive me and make him happy, though I for ever suffer!'

Is prayer only a dream too?

THE END.

LONDON : PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET